

“The Lost Ark”  
1 Samuel 4:1-11

<sup>1</sup>And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.

Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. <sup>2</sup>The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. <sup>3</sup>And when the troops came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, “Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.” <sup>4</sup>So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on 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 soon as the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. <sup>6</sup>And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, “What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?” And when they learned that the ark of the LORD had come to the camp, <sup>7</sup>the Philistines were afraid, for they said, “A 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 can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness. <sup>9</sup>Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight.”

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

During last week’s sermon (1 Samuel 3:1-21), we looked at Samuel’s call. If you remember, God called twice and neither Samuel nor Eli perceived that it was the Lord. However, on the third try, Eli got a clue and told Samuel, “...if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant hears.’”

The next time the Lord calls, His address is a bit different, he says “Samuel! Samuel!” Notice that He uses the boy’s name twice. This puts him in very privileged company as the only two others that God had called this way were Abraham and Moses. This is because Samuel will usher in the next major landmark in Israel’s (and our) redemptive history—the Davidic monarchy.

The first verse of chapter four, this week’s text, actually belongs with last week’s narrative. Why? The beginning of chapter three begins, “...And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision” (3:1b). By the end of the narrative, as Samuel is established as Israel’s prophet, we hear, “And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel” (3:21-4:1a).

In other words, in the appearance of Samuel as God’s prophet, we know that God is active in Israel again. Given the fact that the absence of God’s revelation was viewed as a sign of His displeasure, chapter three and its closing verses would have been seen as a reversal of this. Don’t forget, however, that God’s revelation isn’t just “appearing,” but it is being mediated and given through a very specific person. There is a problem, however. Just because there is a new preacher in town, it doesn’t mean that everyone’s on board with what he’s preaching. Added to this, while the renewal of God’s revelation to

Israel is a blessing, the substance of that revelation must still come to pass. In short, while God promised the deposition of Eli's house, He's still got to make good on that promise. We see the beginning of the end (of Eli's house) in today's text.

We'll look at three things:

- I. Battling the Philistines (1b-4)
- II. The Gospel According to the Philistines (5-9)
- III. Hope in the Midst of Tragedy (10-11)

### **Battling the Philistines (1b-4)**

Notice verse 1b, "Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines..." The first questions we've got to consider are *who* were the Philistines and *why* was Israel at war with them? Let's begin with *who*. Their name derives from the Hebrew word *pelesh* which means something like "to divide, go through, or invade." They were known as the "Sea People" and lived at the southern end of Canaan on the Mediterranean Sea. We also know that they were known for being ironsmiths, which is consistent with what we see when, later on in this book, we'll meet a "little fella" by the name of Goliath!

Why were they at war with Israel? Why not?! Seriously, Israel was commanded to conquer the land of Canaan. The Philistines, an apparently hun-like people, lived there. The conflict first shows up in Judges when we see Samson engaging them and continues throughout much of Israel's history.

Given the role the Philistines play in the unveiling of God's redemptive plan, as we read this story and others like it, it is important to keep in mind the purpose of this book: Israel needs a king like David. Why is it important to remember this? The answer is simple. We know and the original readers would have known that only one king had been able to defeat the Philistines. His name was David. As for Saul, David's predecessor, he not only did he fail to defeat the Philistines, but was, in fact, defeated and killed by them.

In a sense, this book Samuel is like a long campaign ad for the house of David and, if your "hot-button" issue is Philistine terrorism, David is the only candidate with success at defeating them. Added to this "campaign focus" is the issue of Samuel's role in this particular defeat—he has none. In other words, when you look back at this pitiful scene in Israel's history, the author wants us to know that Samuel is in no way associated with it. His name isn't mentioned at all.

Notice next verse 2. Israel is defeated on the field of battle and loses 4,000 men. In the big scheme of things, this isn't a horrible defeat. However, notice Israel's reaction to it. As the defeated troops arrive back at their camp the elders ask, rightly, "Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?" (v. 3) Their mistake, however, is that they didn't wait for an answer!

Instead of praying or seeking the Lord, they immediately began to do the same thing you and I often do in the midst of apparent defeat or in the face of some conflict. They begin to scheme. Immediately they propose to bring the ark of the covenant to the battle front. Notice what it says at the end of verse 3, "Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies."

We're told in the text why they do this. They believe either (a) that, much like the plot of the movie "Raiders of the Lost Ark," the ark has some inherent "magical" power that will give them military superiority, (b) that because the ark is God's kingly footstool upon the earth, if they move the ark to the

battle line, God will somehow be constrained to move with it and, of course, fight for them. In other words, instead of seeking God for Who He is and according to His promises (remember He promised them the land of Canaan), they sought to use Him to accomplish their ends and desires.

On the face of it, that seems crazy until you begin to think about the fact that you and I do that all the time. Let me pose it as a question. When you face your own personal battles do you seek Jesus' face, His counsel, and His promises, or do you try to use Him and His Word to accomplish what you think needs to be done?

As this section of our text closes (v. 4), the elders send to Shiloh and bring the ark of the covenant to the battle-lines. What is just as important here is not only that the ark has been brought to the battlefield, but also those who attend it—Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's wicked sons.

Here we're given a clue as to why this battle is taking place and the ultimate purpose of God. Were the elders wrong to think they could manipulate God by bringing the ark, physically, into the midst of this Philistine conflict? Of course. On the other hand, we also see here a great picture of God's sovereignty in action. God used their sinful actions to accomplish His purposes. What was that purpose? We'll see at the end of the text. For now, let's consider the Philistines' reaction to the arrival of the ark.

### **The Gospel According to the Philistines (5-9)**

Starting at verse 5, as the ark comes into Israel's camp there is such rejoicing and such a mighty shout that the ground shakes. When the Philistines hear this and learn that the ark has arrived, they are horrified. Why? Because in their minds, they believed the same thing that Israel's elders did—that bringing the ark would constrain Israel's god to come and fight for them. In fact, they say, "Woe to us!" twice.

They also say, "Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? Most commentators think that the reason that the Philistines use the word "gods" is because they are simply assuming that Israel is polytheistic like every other nation in Canaan. While their assumption might be true, where did they get it? My guess is that they got it from Israel. In other words, consider that this is the time of the judges and the nation is in spiritual chaos.

We also know that the gods of Canaan throughout Israel's history continued to be a temptation and a stumbling block. At the end of the day, instead of being distinct from the nations around them, Israel simply blended in. Why? They forgot the very thing that frightened the Philistines—that God had delivered them from Egypt with mighty plagues in order to be His covenant people.

Notice what the Philistines say, "These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness" (v. 8b). This is amazing in that a century or two after the fact, the nations surrounding Israel still knew and were moved by the fact of Israel's deliverance from Egypt. Were their facts completely accurate? No. On the other hand, they would have been if Israel had lived according to the grace shown them.

In fact, what should have happened here is that after Israel's defeat and the elders had asked why, besides waiting for an answer, they could've preached the gospel to themselves: "God is with us! He promised He would never fail or forsake us." This is how Joshua and Caleb rebutted the spies who, returning from a recon mission in Canaan, said, "It's impossible." Later on in the book we'll see the right response as well from a young boy who visits the battle-line and hears a giant taunting Israel. He

preaches the gospel by asking a question, “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine to taunt the armies of the living God?” The boy’s name, of course, was David.

While at some level the Philistines understood words of Israel’s gospel story, they didn’t really believe its power. They decided to take their chances saying, “Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight.”

As a side-note, it is interesting to consider how they refer to Israel. They use the word, “Hebrews.” While we often use it as a synonym for Israel—they didn’t. As you read the Old Testament, you’ll notice that Israel is almost always referred to as “Hebrews” by those outside the covenant community.<sup>1</sup> Why? It was a derogatory term. While Noah’s son, Shem, had a greatgrandson called Eber and that may have something to do with the etymology. It also very similar to the word *habiru*—the name for landless refugees and aliens. Either way, they viewed themselves as culturally superior to the Hebrews and would rather go down fighting than simply give up to them, even if their gods had arrived for the fight.

### **Hope in the Midst of Tragedy (10-11)**

In these two verses we see three tragic events, and in these events, specifically the last, we get a glimmer of hope. What happens? As the battle resumes, Israel is defeated (losing 30,000 men); the ark of God is captured (for the first time in Israel’s history); and Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are killed. Next week we’ll consider the emotional and theological ramifications of the ark’s capture.

This week, what I want you to notice is the ray of hope. That would be the death of Hophni and Phinehas. Why would their death be a sign of hope? The reason that their demise should grant Israel hope is because it is yet another evidence that God keeps His promises. He promised that Eli’s sons would both die on the same day and they did. Added to this, it adds more credibility to the ministry of Samuel and his stature as a prophet—what he said came true.

As Christians, seeing hope in the midst of tragedy should be second-nature. Why? Because, the Cross is, perhaps, the greatest portrait of God’s use of apparently hopeless, pointless tragedy to bring about His greatest glory. The death of Hophni and Phinehas, while deserved, is tragic.<sup>2</sup> The death of Jesus is more tragic in that He was innocent. However, tragedy is transformed to glory, three days later.

Keep this in mind the next time you feel that you are suffering or are in the midst of being brought low. Instead of feeling that God has abandoned you, remember that it is in the midst of these kinds of times that He evidences His greatest glory.

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<sup>1</sup> There is one notable exception: the word “Hebrew” being used by those outside of God’s covenant community—Israel’s first king, Saul (1 Samuel 13:3).

<sup>2</sup> I mean here tragic in the sense used by Greek playwrights in which someone of high position is brought low.