

Bible Study October 25, 2023

1 SAUMUEL 4 (NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION)

Matthew 10:34-36 (NIV)

³⁴ “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to turn “a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—³⁶ a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.

1 Samuel 4 (NIV)

And Samuel’s word came to all Israel.

The Philistines Capture the Ark

Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek.

The Philistines, descendants of Noah’s son Ham, settled along the southeastern Mediterranean coast between Egypt and Gaza. They had originally migrated to the Middle East in ships from Greece and Crete. The Egyptians had referred to the Philistines as “sea peoples” due to their migration across the Mediterranean. By Samuel’s time, these warlike people were well established in five of Gaza’s cities in southwest Canaan and were constantly pressing inland against the Israelites. Throughout this time, the Philistines were Israel’s major enemy. They had iron chariots and an organized infantry. Israel was no match for them.

² The Philistines deployed their forces to meet Israel, and as the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand of them on the battlefield. ³ When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, “Why did the LORD bring defeat on us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the LORD’s covenant from Shiloh, so that he may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies.”

The Ark of the Covenant contained the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses, a jar of manna, and Aaron’s staff. The Ark was supposed to be kept in the Most Holy Place, a sacred part of the Tabernacle that only the high priest could enter once a year. Hophni and Phinehas desecrated the room by unlawfully entering it and removing the Ark.

The Israelites rightly recognized the great holiness of the Ark, but they thought that the Ark itself—the wood and metal box—was their source of power. They began to use it as a good luck charm, expecting it to protect them from their enemies. A symbol of God does not guarantee his presence and power. Their attitude toward the Ark came perilously close to idol worship. When the Ark was captured by their enemies, the Israelites thought their glory was gone (4:19-22) and that God had deserted them (7:1-2). God uses his power according to his own wisdom and will. He responds to the faith of those who seek him.

4 So the people sent men to Shiloh, and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim. And Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

The reference to the “Ark of the Covenant of the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, who is enthroned between the cherubim” conveys that God’s presence rested on the Ark of the Covenant between the two gold cherubim (angels) attached to its lid. The people believed that the Ark would bring victory when Hophni and Phinehas carried it into battle.

5 When the ark of the LORD's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. 6 Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, "What's all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?"

When they learned that the ark of the LORD had come into the camp, 7 the Philistines were afraid. "A god has come into the camp," they said. "Oh no! Nothing like this has happened before. 8 We're doomed! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness.

The Philistines were afraid because they remembered stories about God’s intervention for the Israelites when they had left Egypt. But the people of Israel had turned away from God, and they were only clinging to a form of godliness, a symbol of former victories.

People (and churches) often try to live on the memories of God’s blessings. The Israelites wrongly assumed that because God had given them victory in the past, he would do it again, even though they had strayed far from him. Today, as in the stories we read in Scripture, spiritual victories come through a continually renewed relationship with God. Don’t live off the past. Keep your relationship with God new and fresh.

9 Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!"

10 So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. 11 The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

This event fulfills the prophecy stating that Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phinehas, would die “on the same day” (2:34).

Death of Eli

12 That same day a Benjamite ran from the battle line and went to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dust on his head.

At this time, the city of Shiloh was Israel’s religious center (Joshua 18:1; 1 Samuel 4:3). The Tabernacle was permanently set up there. Because Israel did not have a civil capital—a seat of

national government—Shiloh was the natural place for a messenger to deliver the sad news from the battle. Many believe that it was during this battle that Shiloh was destroyed (Jeremiah 7:12; 26:2-6; also see the note on 1 Samuel 7:1).

13 When he arrived, there was Eli sitting on his chair by the side of the road, watching, because his heart feared for the ark of God. When the man entered the town and told what had happened, the whole town sent up a cry.

14 Eli heard the outcry and asked, “What is the meaning of this uproar?”

The man hurried over to Eli, ¹⁵ who was ninety-eight years old and whose eyes had failed so that he could not see. ¹⁶ He told Eli, “I have just come from the battle line; I fled from it this very day.”

Eli asked, “What happened, my son?”

17 The man who brought the news replied, “Israel fled before the Philistines, and the army has suffered heavy losses. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured.”

18 When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backward off his chair by the side of the gate. His neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man, and he was heavy. He had led Israel forty years.

Eli was Israel’s judge and high priest. His death marked the end of the dark period of the judges when most of the Israelites ignored God. Although Samuel was also a judge, his career saw the transition from Israel’s rule by judges to the nation’s monarchy. He began the great revival that the people of Israel would experience for the next century. The Bible does not say who became the next high priest (Samuel was not eligible because he was not a direct descendant of Aaron), but Samuel functioned as a priest at this time by offering important sacrifices throughout Israel.

19 His daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant and near the time of delivery. When she heard the news that the ark of God had been captured and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she went into labor and gave birth, but was overcome by her labor pains. ²⁰ As she was dying, the women attending her said, “Don’t despair; you have given birth to a son.” But she did not respond or pay any attention.

21 She named the boy Ichabod, saying, “The Glory has departed from Israel”—because of the capture of the ark of God and the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband. ²² She said, “The Glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.”

This incident illustrates the spiritual darkness and decline of Israel. This young boy, Ichabod, was supposed to succeed his father, Phinehas, in the priesthood, but his father had been killed because he was an evil man who had desecrated the Tabernacle. The terror of God’s leaving his people overshadowed the joy of childbirth. When sin dominates our lives, even God-given joys and pleasures seem empty.