

1 Samuel 4:1-22

Philistines Capture the Ark

1 Samuel 4:1-2 - "And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out against the Philistines to battle, and pitched beside Ebenezer: and the Philistines pitched in Aphek. 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."

"And the word of Samuel came to all Israel." - some sources place this at the end of the previous chapter.

Samuel grew to manhood and was becoming recognized as a prophet to the whole nation, who could speak with a binding and authoritative command to the people. But he would not act with full authority until the death of Eli.

The Philistines - At the death of Samson, thousands of Philistines were killed. It seems like Israel had a respite from their attacks as Samuel grew up. But after a time they recovered and were now encroaching again into Israelite territory.

Apparently, with the arrival of the Philistines, Israel had gone to war without consulting God - not surprising after reading about the backslidden state of their faith. So they were beaten in battle, losing 4,000 men.

Eben-ezer = "the stone or rock of help." The location would receive this name only in the future. It was not given until 20 years afterwards, on the occasion of the great defeat of the Philistines (**1 Samuel 7:12**).

1 Samuel 4:3 - "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."

The Israelites didn't decide to bring out the Ark because of their faith or piety. This is one of several times that sacred objects or places are venerated or worshipped instead of God Himself. The Ark was merely the resting place of God, who dwelled between the cherubim on the mercy seat. The Almighty Himself should be the object of trust, not the Ark, which was merely his throne.

Instead, the Israelites were looking at the Ark like a magical talisman for protection.

Likewise, the serpent of brass held up by Moses to heal those bitten by fiery serpents (**Numbers 21:4-9**), was retained, venerated and "the children of Israel did burn incense to it" (**2 Kings 18:4**) and it had to be destroyed. Jesus pointed to this brass serpent lifted up on a rod as a symbol of His death on the cross:

- **John 3:14-15** - "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life."

But even the cross can become an idol if you haven't really experienced it, or if it's merely an object hung around your neck for good luck.

Another example is Jerusalem itself, and the Temple it contained. Jeremiah exhorts the people not to trust in the holy city or the Temple itself to protect them:

- **Jeremiah 7:4** - "Thus says the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel: Correct your ways and deeds, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words, chanting: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.'"

We must always direct our faith and trust toward God, and not human leaders or sacred objects or man-made liturgies or traditional ways of doing things.

This was a truth Israel had forgotten.

1 Samuel 4:4 - "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."

The rabbis say this was God's doing, in order to get Hophni and Phinehas to the battle to be killed according to the earlier prophecy of Samuel to Eli.

1 Samuel 4:5-6 - "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. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, What meaneth the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews? And they understood that the ark of the LORD was come into the camp."

This was an electrifying moment. This was probably the first time since the settlement of Israel in Canaan, that the ark had been brought into the camp, and therefore the people no doubt anticipated from its presence a renewal of the marvelous victories gained by Israel under Moses and Joshua.

Moses in fact had connected military victory with the presence of the Ark:

- **Numbers 10:35** - "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said, Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee."

But the excitement and the great shout of the soldiers was all just a display of what can be called "soul power." We see it in the emotional encouragement and hope generated for a sports team, or that pulls a crowd together. Like the "*kiai*" in karate - a shout that both startles the enemy, focuses your energy and bolsters your confidence.

Joshua and later Gideon's army used such a shout, but those were actions directed by God, and power was from the Holy Spirit.

In fact, two words based on *rûa'* are used in the phrase "shouted with a great shout" and both can mean either a shout or a blast from the shofar. At Jericho, the Jews were to keep silent and pray until they saw the walls fall (**Joshua 6:10**), then they were to shout and blow the trumpets in victory. Here Israel prematurely and presumptuously assumes victory with their shout, and were punished for it. - Abarbanel

1 Samuel 4:7-8 - "And the Philistines were afraid, for they said, God is come into the camp. And they said, Woe unto us! for there hath not been such a thing heretofore. Woe unto us! who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty Gods? these are the Gods that smote the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness."

Here, Israel's shout had the effect of disturbing the Philistines. They were momentarily frightened by the Ark, remembering the stories of God's victories over Egypt in the plagues and the Red Sea. But they were able to overcome it.

'Quit Yourselves Like Men'

The Philistines then encourage one another:

1 Samuel 4:9 - "Be strong, and quit yourselves like men, O ye Philistines, that ye be not servants unto the Hebrews, as they have been to you: quit yourselves like men, and fight."

Paul (strangely) seems to quote this Philistine cry, but with a completely different meaning for people of faith. We are to draw strength from the Spirit, rather than from the flesh.

Spiritual strength begins with repentance and humility.

- **1 Corinthians 16:13-14** - "Watch ye (*grēgoreō*), stand fast (*stēkō*) in the faith, quit you like men (*andrizomai*), be strong (*krataioō*). Do everything in love."

To "watch" means "to be awake, alert and roused from slumber."

"stand fast" (*stēkō*) means "persevere" in the Lord (! **Thessalonians 3:8**); in one spirit and one mind (**Philippians 1:27**) and "in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free" (**Galatians 5:1**).

Being "strong" for us means to be strong in the Spirit, and contains the idea of courage. The child Jesus "waxed strong in the spirit" (**Luke 2:40**); to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man" (**Ephesians 3:16**).

Paul shows us how spiritual strength is radically different in both its source and its

effect. It takes courage to acknowledge your weakness.

- **2 Corinthians 12:9** - "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

The strength and energy generated by "soul power" so evident in large gatherings, rock concerts, sports stadiums, political rallies or angry mobs has no place in the life of faith. Pagan religions try to mimic genuine spirituality with "soul power" - rhythmic music, dance and ritual often aided by hallucinogenic drugs to induce emotional or ecstatic trances.

Current New Age beliefs try to draw spiritual power or connection through God's creation in nature, in the same way the Israelites drew it from the presence of the Ark. But God must be the focus of worship, not his creation or his throne.

Christians often are even tempted to venerate a charismatic leader, the Bible, or the church fellowship or community, or old traditions. We can also be led into "soul power" by a perceived enemy that induces us to hate rather than love.

The power of Christ rests upon us when we stop trying, are conscious of our weakness and inabilities and "reckon ourselves as dead" with Christ on the cross. This is foolishness and an offensive stumbling block to the world (**1 Corinthians 1:23**).

That's why Paul urges us to watch, stand fast, be of good courage, be strengthened in the Spirit, and act only out of love.

Israel Defeated

1 Samuel 4:10-11 - "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. And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain."

This fulfilled one part of Samuel's prophecy. Josephus reports that Eli had told his sons that if the Ark was taken, they were not to desire life nor ever dare to come into his presence again.

1 Samuel 4:12 - "And there ran a man of Benjamin out of the army, and came to Shiloh the same day with his clothes rent, and with earth upon his head."

Rashi - And a man of Benjamin: [According to the Midrash] This was Saul, who grabbed the tablets [of the Law] from the hands of Goliath and fled. Because the Ark when it is captured is not called the Ark of the Covenant but rather the Ark of God, the rabbis assume the tablets of the covenant were rescued and no longer in the Ark. His run from the battlefield to Shiloh is commemorated in **2 Samuel 1:23**, describing Saul and

Jonathan as "swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions."

The Targum adds some interesting details about Goliath. When Goliath is later taunting the Israelites (**1 Samuel 17:8**) he boasts: "I am the Philistine who killed Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli, and who seized the Ark and brought it to our god Dagon."

It is a 42-mile run from Ebenezer to Shiloh. Rent clothes with dirt on your head was sign that the messenger carried bad news. But because Eli was blind, he could neither see the messenger nor read the signs, and had to ask.

The Bad News

1 Samuel 4:17-18 - "And the messenger answered and said, Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there hath been also a great slaughter among the people, and thy two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God is taken. And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God, that he fell from off the seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck brake, and he died: for he was an old man, and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years."

"messenger" = *bāšar* - "bearer of tidings" - the rabbis note that this is a word that generally means good news. In this instance it was bad news for Israel, but also good news, because God was using this military defeat to bring Israel to repentance. This sheds some light on the New Testament word for "Good News" or the Gospel - *euaggélion*. It's bad news for our flesh, but good news for us as the *ekklesia* - as Christ's Bride who is being "called out" of the Great Whore to take her place beside Him.

Phinehas's Wife Bears Ichabod

Just before she dies from shock, she gives birth to a child she named Ichabod, which means "no glory" because "The glory of God has departed from Israel."

The Shekinah or "indwelling" was the visible glory of God that had hovered over the mercy seat of the Ark since the wilderness (**Exodus 40:34-35**). Now it had gone into exile.

Later, at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, Ezekiel describes a similar departure, as Israel was about to go into exile.

In **Ezekiel 9**, God assigns the "man in linen" the job of placing the mark of the *tau* - the cross - on the foreheads of those who cry because of Israel's abominations. They will be spared, with all the rest to be executed. Ezekiel 10 shows the glory of God moving from the Holy of Holies to the threshold of the Temple, then to the east gate of the Temple, and then to the Mount of Olives (Ezekiel 11:23) before finally ascending to heaven.

- **Deuteronomy 31:17-18** - "Then My anger shall be aroused against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured."

And many evils and troubles shall befall them, so that they will say in that day, 'Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?'"

Whenever we desecrate his dwelling place within us by setting ourselves up as an anti-Christ or placing idols to worship - God will get forced out. God stays only where He is wanted and obeyed.

Repentance will bring Him back: The Spirit will again fill his temple.

Paul calls this "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (**Colossians 1:27**)

The capture of the Ark is linked to Israel's idolatry in Psalm 78:

- **Psalm 78:58-61** - "For they provoked him to anger with their high places, and moved him to jealousy with their graven images. When God heard this, he was wroth, and greatly abhorred Israel: So that he forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent which he placed among men; And delivered his strength into captivity, and his glory into the enemy's hand."

God allowed the capture of the Ark not only as chastisement for the Israelites but so He could show His superiority over the gods of the Philistines - to the extent where they willingly gave it back, as we'll see in the next two chapters.