

The Judgment of the Lord

Text: 1 Samuel 4

Introduction: Superstition seems to be a universal thing that transcends cultures. Certainly there are different things that people are superstitious about in different cultures. But the presence of superstition itself seems to be universal. In American culture, there are all kinds of things that are supposed to bring good luck: horseshoes, wishbones, four-leafed clovers, rabbit feet, shooting stars, head-side-up pennies, rainbows, dream catchers, the number 7, sharing chain letters, and the list goes on.

On the other hand, there are things that are said to lead to bad luck: black cats, Friday the 13, opening an umbrella inside, breaking a mirror, walking under an open ladder, crossing arms when shaking hands, walking on a grave, spilling salt, failure to share a chain letter, and many other things as well.

If you were here for Bible School, you know that there was one night when Mahea had two New York Yankees towels up here in the front for an activity that they were doing. I was rightly very offended by the sight of towels representing the Evil Empire hanging here in the front of our worship space. If I was superstitious, I might suggest that hanging those towels in the front of our worship space had something to do with the Orioles putting a beating on the Yankees on Thursday by a score of 17-5.

But as Christians, we know that luck, whether good or bad, doesn't exist. There is a God in heaven who created everything. He ordered the universe and sustains it even now by the word of His power. Our God is sovereign over His creation. He holds the whole world in His hands. We believe in providence, not luck.

But our text this morning tells us of a time when the people of God tried to use the Ark of God as a good luck charm. They thought they could harness the power of God and use it according to their own purposes. Perhaps you too have tried to leverage God's power for your own purposes. God has a warning for us in that regard this morning.

We're in 1 Samuel 4. Go ahead and turn there in your Bible. We are making our way through 1 Samuel. Last week we focused on Samuel. This week we return our attention to Eli and his sons Hophni and Phinehas.

(Read 1 Samuel 4...Pray)

As we look at this passage, we're going to see that the Israelites asked the right question, but came up with the wrong answer, and that produced a tragic result.

I. The right question (1 Samuel 4:1-3a).

A. The Israelites want to know, "Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?" (vs. 3a).

1. This is an important question for them to ask.
2. But why are they asking this question? What had happened?

B. They had experienced defeat at the hands of the Philistines (vs. 1-2).

1. We don't know how much time had passed from the end of chapter 3 to the beginning of chapter 4.
 - a. We do see that Samuel's prophetic ministry had spread.
 - b. He started out speaking to Eli.
 - c. Now the word of Samuel came to all Israel (vs. 1a).
 - d. This really is a damning statement because there is no evidence that they listened. In fact, their defeat indicates that they had not listened.
 - e. They were busy doing what was right in their own eyes.
2. And it's here that we are introduced to one of Israel's greatest enemies in 1 Samuel.
 - a. The Philistines were a seafaring people who came from the Aegean isles.
 - b. They first appear in the Bible during the judgeship of Deborah in Judges 3.
 - c. By the time Samson became judge, their influence had spread to the point that they had subjugated much of Israel.

- d. And here in 1 Samuel, we are going to see Saul, Jonathan, and David fighting the Philistines.
3. But in this particular battle here in 1 Samuel 4, Israel was defeated and lost about 4,000 men in battle.
- C. After the battle was over, the elders of Israel asked their question, “Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?” (vs. 3a).
1. I imagine them going back to their camp with their heads lowered in defeat. Everyone is wondering what happened out there. As they cleaned themselves up and bandaged their wounds, they wondered, “Why did we lose? We are God’s people. God has always been on our side. What is going on here?”
 2. So, the elders asked, “Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?” (vs. 3a).
 3. It was a good question. It ultimately WAS the Lord who had defeated them.
 4. They asked the right question. But where should they have turned for a response?
 5. They should have recognized their sin and sought the Lord in humility with hearts of repentance.
 6. The Lord had already spoken through Samuel of His coming judgment. They should have cried out to the Lord directly.
- D. Have you ever found yourself asking the question “Why?”
1. Of course you have. We all have.
 2. We’ve all faced circumstances in our lives that we didn’t understand. We’ve all had things happen to us that didn’t fit with our plans for our lives. And in those situations, we often find ourselves asking “Why?”
 3. There’s nothing wrong with the question. It’s a fine question to ask. But where we take the question is where things can go wrong.
 4. We have to learn to take the question to God.

- a. For one thing, we know that He is sovereign over everything. Nothing happens in our lives that is outside of His sovereign control. Our circumstances may take us by surprise, but they never take God by surprise. We saw that this was truth with the circumstances of Hannah’s life in chapter 1. And we see that it’s true with the Israelites’ defeat at the hands of the Philistines here in chapter 4.
- b. We also know that our God is good. Hannah’s circumstances weren’t good. But God remained good in the midst of her circumstances. The Israelites’ circumstances here in 1 Samuel 4 aren’t good. But God is good. Bad things happen in this world. People sin against one another. People get hurt or sick. People die. Bad things happen in this world because our world is broken. Things are not as they should be. Things are not as God created them to be. But God is good. He created everything very good. But man introduced sin into the world, and as a result, bad things happen.
- c. We also know that God is the one who can do something about our circumstances. So often, we feel hopeless in the midst of impossible circumstances. That’s actually a good place for us to be. As long as we learn to take our circumstances to God. He’s able to change our circumstances. He’s also able to give us the grace to endure and even thrive in the midst of our circumstances even if He doesn’t change our circumstances.

Sadly, in 1 Samuel 4, the elders of Israel asked the right question, but they came up with...

II. The wrong answer (1 Samuel 4:3b-9).

A. This brings us to the second part of the story.

1. They determined to bring the Ark of the Covenant from Shiloh to their camp (vs. 3b).
 - a. You can read about the building of the Ark of the Covenant in Exodus 25.

- b. It was a golden box of acacia wood that represented the presence of God.
 - c. It housed the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments and was kept in the Holy of Holies in the temple.
2. The hope in bringing the Ark into their camp was that it would save them from the power of their enemies (vs. 3c).
- a. Israel's history was full of occasions when the presence of the Ark brought the power of God upon the people of God and gave them victory.
 - b. The Ark went before the people of God as a sign of His promised victory when they crossed the Jordan in Canaan (Joshua 3:10-11).
 - c. In the battle of Jericho, the priests went before the Ark, blowing trumpets, and the walls of Jericho fell (Joshua 6:4-20).
 - d. So now in 1 Samuel 4, the people think that bringing the Ark into their camp will ensure victory over the Philistines.
3. So, they brought the Ark of the Covenant from the temple in Shiloh to their camp (vs. 4a).
4. Then we see our good friends Hophni and Phinehas again (vs. 4b).
- a. They were there with the Ark of the Covenant of God.
 - b. They were the priests. They were the religious leaders. They wanted to give the impression that they were in tune with the Lord.
 - c. The only problem is that this is contrary to everything we have seen about them thus far.
 - d. They obviously did not have an adequate understanding of the holiness of God.
 - e. Inside the Ark were the tablets of God's law which Hophni and Phinehas had disregarded while serving as Israel's priests.
- f. They had no regard for the commands of God. But now they want God's blessing on them and the people of Israel.
5. The text says that when the Ark came into the camp, the people gave a mighty shout so that the earth resounded (vs. 5).
6. No one could stop them now. They had their good luck charm.
7. They had harnessed the power of God and would now wield it against the Philistines.
8. But where the people of Israel were excited, the response in the Philistine camp was the opposite. First, they wondered what was going on (vs. 6a).
9. When they found out it was the Ark, they were afraid (vs. 6b-8).
- a. They said, "A god has come into the camp" (vs. 7).
 - b. They were talking about the Ark. The Philistines were idol worshippers. They viewed the Ark like one of their idols. The sad thing is that the Israelites demonstrate a similar view of the Ark.
 - c. The Philistines said, "Woe to us!" (vs. 7).
 - d. They had heard stories of God's work among His people.
 - e. The specific story they mention here is the Exodus from Egypt.
 - f. Their understanding of God and what had happened was, of course, not accurate. They refer to the "gods" (vs. 8b). The Lord is ONE. They say that the Egyptians were struck with plagues in the wilderness. The plagues were in Egypt.
10. But eventually, their fear turned to resolve. They said, "Take courage and be men, O Philistines,...be men and fight" (vs. 9).
11. This response is baffling. They knew of the power of God. Yet, in their arrogance, they thought they could overcome Him. Little did they know that they would actually be the ones sovereignly used by the one true God as instruments of His judgment.

B. I wonder if you, like the Israelites, have ever tried to use God as a good luck charm to get your way instead of truly turning from your sin and turning to Him with repentance and faith.

1. See, the root issue with the people of Israel was not what was missing from their camp but what was present in their camp.
2. Sin had infiltrated their camp. Repentance was the proper response.
3. Yet, they wanted the power of God without the holiness of God. They wanted God's power, but they didn't want His character.
4. And the same is often true in our lives. We treat God like our own personal genie.
5. We think that if I just pray and read my Bible. Or I go to church. Or I give an offering. Then God will be pleased with me and do what I want Him to do.
6. Just like the Ark of God was not to be manipulated by the people of Israel then, the spiritual disciplines are not for us to manipulate to try to get God to do what we want.
7. The Ark was a means by which the people of Israel could know the one true God and truly commune with Him. The same is true of the spiritual disciplines. We don't pray or read our Bibles to get God to do what we want. We pray and read our Bibles because we need God. We need relationship with Him. God is not a means to some other end. He is the end. We were made for Him. We were made for relationship with God. We were made to worship Him.

Though the elders of Israel asked the right question, they came up with the wrong answer, and we see...

III. The tragic result (1 Samuel 4:10-22).

A. The Philistines defeated the Israelites handily (vs. 10-11).

1. Thirty-thousand foot soldiers lost their lives that day.
2. Those who did not die fled to their homes.

3. The Ark of God was captured.

4. Hophni and Phinehas died.

B. Then we're told of Eli the priest's response when the messenger arrived with news from the battlefield (vs. 12).

1. The text tells us that Eli was sitting by the road watching (vs. 13).
 - a. It has been suggested that this was characteristic of Eli. He was always sitting and waiting when he should have been standing and acting.
 - b. But Eli was a very old and feeble man at this point in his life.
 - c. Can you imagine what was going through his mind?
 - d. He knew God's promise of judgment. Perhaps he wondered if this would be the day.
 - e. The Bible tells us that his heart trembled for the Ark of God (vs. 13a). Which is interesting in light of the other responses we have seen to the Israelites bringing the Ark into their camp.
 - f. What did Eli know that the rest of the people either didn't know or weren't thinking about? He knew of God's promise of judgment that he had heard directly from God Himself back in chapter 2 and then again through Samuel in chapter 3.
2. The text says that the messenger initially ran into the city and shared the news with those close by (vs. 13b). And all the city cried out.
3. Eli heard the outcry and wanted to know what was going on (vs. 14a).
4. So, the man hurried over to Eli to share the news (vs. 14b). Eli didn't know the exact nature of the news at this point, but I'm sure he realized that it wasn't good.
5. Then we're told of Eli's condition (vs. 15). He was 98 years old. His eyes were set so that he could not see.
6. The man reported that he had been on the battlefield (vs. 16a).
7. Eli asked, "How did it go, my son?" (vs. 16b).

8. **And in response, the messenger gave a four-fold report that goes from bad to worst (vs. 17). Israel has fled from the Philistines. A great defeat has taken place. More specifically, there are 30,000 dead Israelite soldiers. Your sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are also dead. And the Ark of God has been captured.**
9. **Look at what happened when Eli heard the report (vs. 18). (Read vs. 18)**
10. **Eli had judged Israel for 40 years. The capture of the Ark and the death of Eli and his sons marked the end of a very dark period in Israel's history. And it all began with Israel forgetting the Lord and pursuing other gods.**

C. As followers of Jesus, what do you think we can learn from Eli's death?

1. **It's interesting to note that it was not the death of his sons, but the capture of the Ark of God that caused the shock which led to Eli's death.**
2. **Eli had accepted his own fall from office (1 Samuel 3:18). He even knew that his sons were going to die as well.**
3. **But now he saw how the sin of he and his sons had affected the whole nation.**
4. **I'm sure Eli loved the people of Israel and desired good for them. He was their priest. He wanted them to follow the Lord and prosper. But now the Ark of God had been captured, and the presence of God was removed from the people as a result of Eli and his son's sin.**
5. **Perhaps there is a warning here for us as well. We have a tendency to think that our sin only affects us. The problem is that the effects of sin always extend beyond those who are directly involved. Families are always affected by the sin of those they love. Churches are often affected by the sin of their members. Businesses are even sometimes affected by the sin of their employees. We cannot adopt a mindset that says our sin only affects us. Eli learned this lesson the hard way. And we would do well to learn it from him.**

6. **There is a very real sense in which Eli was directly responsible for the capture of the Ark. He was the priest. He had the responsibility of mediating between God and man. He should have never allowed the Ark to be taken from the temple where it could be captured on the field of battle. But just as he had trouble standing up to his sons, he did not stand up to the elders either when they wanted to bring the Ark from the temple.**
7. **And the sad truth in all of this is that Eli's life ended in disgrace. He was Israel's priest. Yet his legacy was one of failure and despair. Rather than leading the people to God, he had led them away from God. And God removed his presence from His people.**
8. **Eli failed as a moral and spiritual leader in his own family which led to his failure as a moral and spiritual leader for the nation also. He failed to distinguish between religious activities and true godliness. He passed religious activities on to his sons, but he failed to pass on his faith.**
9. **As followers of Jesus, we too should be concerned about the kind of legacies that we will leave behind. Not so much because we want people to think well of us, but because we want to represent Christ well. Eli, by his unwillingness to confront his sons in their sin, gave them a misrepresentation of God. God is holy. He does not tolerate sin. He will execute justice against the unrighteous. But Eli sent the opposite message to his sons as a result of his inaction, and ultimately, it led to their ruin. We have a responsibility to our children, grandchildren, and others we lead to present an accurate picture of who God is so they may recognize their sin before Him, repent of their sin, and trust Christ for salvation.**

D. As we keep reading through the end of the chapter, we see very clearly the effects of Eli and his sons' sin on the next generation.

1. **We're told that Phinehas' wife was pregnant and was near the end of her pregnancy (vs. 19a).**

2. **The news of her father-in-law and husband's death along with the Ark of God being captured caused her to go into labor, and she had the baby (vs. 19b).**
3. **This should have been a joyous occasion for her (vs. 20). She had given birth to a son. But her father-in-law was dead. Her husband was dead. The Ark had been captured. And now she was going to die as well. Her baby boy would be orphaned.**
4. **And in a demonstration of the tragedy of the moment, with her last breaths she named the boy Ichabod (vs. 21). This was not a name of honor. The name Ichabod means "no glory" or "where is the glory?" She said, "The glory has departed from Israel!"**
5. **The Ark had been captured and Israel's priests were dead (vs. 22). She reasoned that Israel's link with God had been lost. She may have even thought that the Philistines now controlled the power of God. What a tragedy.**
6. **There's an important sense in which she was right in her despair. The Ark was gone, and God's hand of discipline was heavy upon His people. The capturing of the Ark did not CAUSE God to temporarily remove His presence from His people, but it was a SIGN of it.**
7. **But we should be clear that God had not ultimately forsaken His people. His covenant with their father Abraham could not be broken. He promised them back in Exodus 6 that He would be their God and they would be His people. The glory of God would return again. And ultimately, His glory would manifest itself, not in a box made of acacia wood, but in the person of Jesus Christ.**

Conclusion: As we come to the end of 1 Samuel 4, the situation in Israel is bleak, isn't it? There's death and mourning everywhere. The Ark of God has been captured by the Philistines. Things are not looking good.

But God is not done with His people. Just as God delivered Israel into the hands of the Philistines, He is more than able to deliver them out of the hands of the Philistines.

There's a leadership crisis in Israel. The priests were leading the people away from God rather than to God. But now even the priests are dead.

What will God do? What will become of His people? Who will lead God's people?

As we continue to make our way through 1 Samuel, we're going to see the answer to these questions that was given in our Scripture reading this morning in Psalm 78.

*Then the Lord awoke as from sleep,
like a strong man shouting because of wine.
66 And he put his adversaries to rout;
he put them to everlasting shame.
67 He rejected the tent of Joseph;
he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim,
68 but he chose the tribe of Judah,
Mount Zion, which he loves.
69 He built his sanctuary like the high heavens,
like the earth, which he has founded forever.
70 He chose David his servant
and took him from the sheepfolds;
71 from following the nursing ewes he brought him
to shepherd Jacob his people,
Israel his inheritance.
72 With upright heart he shepherded them
and guided them with his skillful hand.*

In due time in the story of 1 Samuel, God will raise up David as king to lead His people. But in pointing us to David, the psalmist is really pointing us to one who would come after David. From the line of David. One who, with a truly upright heart would shepherd His people. The Good Shepherd. The Chief Shepherd. The Lord Jesus Christ.

Have you trusted in the Good Shepherd? Are you trusting Him right now?

See, just like judgment came for Eli and his sons, judgment is coming for us as well. But God has provided us with a means of escape. That means of escape is Jesus His Son.

Jesus took the judgment for sin that we deserve upon Himself on the cross. He died in our place. As our substitute. To pay for our sin.

And He calls on all of us to turn from our sin and place our trust in Him. We can be at peace with God. We can have access to God. But only through Jesus.

Turn from your sin. Cling to Jesus in faith. Enjoy fellowship with God.