



5: Yahweh's Presence & Power

(1 Sam 4-7:4)

Today we see the gripping story of the ark of the covenant being captured, a false god face-plants, and where people are reminded that Yahweh's Powerful Hand is moved by purity & sincerity, not false promises or religious rituals.

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* All Scripture is from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB) unless otherwise noted.

Battle with the Philistines

1 Samuel 4:1-3

Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle and camped at Ebenezer while the Philistines camped at Aphek. The Philistines lined up in battle formation against Israel, and as the battle intensified, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who struck down about four thousand men on the battlefield. When the troops returned to the camp, the elders of Israel asked, "Why did the LORD defeat us today before the Philistines?"

Let's bring the ark of the LORD's covenant from Shiloh. Then it will go with us and save us from our enemies."

The Philistines likely meaning, "to invade", were sea peoples who settled along the coastal plains of Southern Israel, the same group of people that Samson ultimately died fighting years before (Judges 16). In total, hostilities between Israel & the Philistines lasted almost 200 years! And this time, when the fight came, Israel was NOT on the winning side.

So, rather than humbly seeking Yahweh to determine why He allowed this defeat, the people of Israel take another route.

Bringing Out the Ark of the Covenant

1 Samuel 4:4-5

So the people sent men to Shiloh to bring back the ark of the covenant of the LORD of Armies, Who is enthroned between the cherubim. Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. When the ark of the covenant of the LORD entered the camp, all the Israelites raised such a loud shout that the ground shook.

The ark of the covenant was a wooden box overlaid with pure gold, housing the tablets inscribed with the 10 commandments along with a few other items including Aaron's rod & a golden jar with manna Yahweh had provided during the Exodus (Heb 9:4).

On top of the ark were 2 cherubim facing one another, covering the mercy seat/atonement cover with their wings (Ex 25:18-22). The mercy seat was the flat section that represented the footstool of Yahweh's throne.

Welp, looks like it's over for the Philistines, because the people have brought out Yahweh's Presence & Power to fight for them. That's what many of the Philistines thought too, as they heard the shouting from 2 miles away.¹

That Eli's sons were the ark of the covenant - earlier called "wicked men" (1 Sam 2:12) whom God intended to kill (1 Sam 2:25), should cause pause for the reader.

1 Samuel 4:6-9

The Philistines heard the sound of the war cry and asked, "What's this loud shout in the Hebrews' camp?" When the Philistines discovered that the ark of the LORD had entered the camp, they panicked. "A god has entered their camp!" they said. "Woe to us! Nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who will rescue us from these magnificent gods? These are the gods that slaughtered the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. Show some courage and be men, Philistines! Otherwise, you'll serve the Hebrews just as they served you. Now be men and fight!"

As a polytheistic people, the Philistines had many gods and mistook the Hebrew people to have many gods as well. They were wrong about that but they WEREN'T WRONG about the stories of the plagues that Yahweh had brought upon the Egyptians, and they were panicked they were about to experience the same thing.

¹ Robert D. Bergen, 1, 2 Samuel, vol. 7, The New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 91.

Prophecy Fulfilled & Ark Captured

1 Samuel 4:10-11

So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and each man fled to his tent. The slaughter was severe—thirty thousand of the Israelite foot soldiers fell. **The ark of God was captured**, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

Eli's two sons died in fulfillment of what Yahweh had spoken through the man of God (1 Sam 2:34). Further, Israel was defeated and the result was almost 10x worse than the previous bloody battle. But most significantly, **the ark of God** - the box that housed the 10 commandments & several other sacred items - the item revered & represented the Presence of Yahweh in the middle of the people, was captured.

Contrary to their hope, the ark of the covenant didn't force Yahweh's Hand, but proved that...

BIG TRUTH: Yahweh's Powerful Hand is moved by Purity & Sincerity...not false promises or religious rituals.

- God won't be manipulated by our RELIGIOUS RITUALS including shouting, singing, and praying - that means NOTHING without a SINCERE ATTITUDE of obedience.
- God is not a magic wand we wave or a secret weapon we pull out of a box when we get in a bind.

The ark of the covenant - the symbol of Yahweh's Presence & Power - is GONE. *What would this mean on Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement?* The high priest would no longer be able to fulfill what the law says about sprinkling the blood of the bull & goat on the ark. And all of this has come about because of wicked leaders & people who treat Yahweh and His laws with a quick wink rather than a bowed knee.

Eli's Death & God's Glory Gone

1 Samuel 4:12-18

That same day, a Benjaminite man ran from the battle and came to Shiloh. His clothes were torn, and there was dirt on his head. When he arrived, there was Eli sitting on his chair beside the road waiting, because he was anxious about the ark of God. When the man entered the city to give a report, the entire city cried out. Eli heard the outcry and asked, "Why this commotion?" The man quickly came and reported to Eli. At that time Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes didn't move because he couldn't see. The man said to Eli, "I'm the one who came from the battle. I fled from there today." "What happened, my son?" Eli asked. The messenger answered, "Israel has fled from the Philistines, and also there was a great slaughter among the people. Your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are both dead, and **the ark of God has been captured.**" When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backward off the chair by the city gate, and since he was old and heavy, his neck broke and he died. Eli had judged Israel forty years.

Eli's sons are dead and Eli dies on the same day. And it got even worse...

1 Samuel 4:19

Eli's daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant and about to give birth. When she heard the news about the capture of God's ark and the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband, she collapsed and gave birth because her labor pains came on her. As she was dying, the women taking care of her said, "Don't be afraid. You've given birth to a son!" But she did not respond or pay attention. She named the boy **Ichabod**, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel," referring to the capture of the ark of God and to the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband. "The glory has departed from Israel," she said, "because the ark of God has been captured."

Phinehas' wife names her child **Ichabod**, meaning either "*Where is the glory?*" or "*no glory*" - referring to Yahweh's presence; hence, the text means "Where is Yahweh?"² One commentator notes that with the capture of the ark of the covenant, "we reach a point in Israelite history lower than any since the captivity in Egypt."³ This is a moment of total despair, leaving Israel's future as the people of Yahweh, in doubt.

- The archaeological evidence seems to confirm the temple at Shiloh was also destroyed by the Philistines in the days of Eli.⁴
- (1) Shiloh is never again mentioned as a worship center for Israel in this writing; (2) Samuel moved the center of his activities and the altar of Yahweh back to his hometown of Ramah rather than Shiloh (1 Sam 7:17).⁵

Dagon's Defeat

1 Samuel 5:1-3

After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod, brought it into the temple of Dagon and placed it next to his statue. When the people of Ashdod got up early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and returned him to his place.

Dagon was likely the highest of the Philistine gods (Jud 16:23, 1 Chr 10:10), and the ark of God now sits next to Dagon, the conquered sitting by the conqueror, or so it seems.

² John MacArthur Jr., ed., The MacArthur Study Bible, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997), 384.

³ Hertzberg, 1 and II Samuel, 50 as quoted by Bill T. Arnold, 1 & 2 Samuel, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 108-109.

⁴ Israel Finkelstein, The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988), 228-32; idem, "Excavations at Shiloh 1981-1984, Preliminary Report," TA 12 (1985): 123-80.

⁵ Robert D. Bergen, 1, 2 Samuel, vol. 7, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 92.

1 Samuel 5:4-5 But when they got up early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. This time, Dagon's head and both of his hands were broken off and lying on the threshold. Only Dagon's torso remained. That is why, still today, the priests of Dagon and everyone who enters the temple of Dagon in Ashdod do not step on Dagon's threshold.

Once again, it looked as though Dagon was now bowing with his face before the ark of Yahweh, the true conqueror. Except, this time, his head and hands were broken off. The mighty Dagon is now headless & handleless - defeated & powerless. Dagon has been reduced to a stump! Just as Eli and fallen and broken his neck, the false god Dagon had fallen before Yahweh's Presence and Power and snapped his head off!

1 Samuel 5:6-8 The LORD's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod. He terrified the people of Ashdod and its territory and afflicted them with tumors. When the people of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, "The ark of Israel's God must not stay here with us, because his hand is strongly against us and our god Dagon." So they called all the Philistine rulers together and asked, "What should we do with the ark of Israel's God?" "The ark of Israel's God should be moved to Gath," they replied. So they moved the ark of Israel's God.

The word play from the Hebrew is not noticed in English but the word *kabod* is the word for both for "glory" and "heavy". So, as the mother had named her son, *Ikabod*, "Where is the glory?" or "no glory" - the answer is found in Ashdod among the Philistines where Yahweh's Presence & Power can't be denied!

1 Samuel 5:9-12 After they had moved it, the LORD's hand was against the city of Gath, causing a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, from the youngest to the oldest, with an outbreak of tumors. The people of Gath then sent the ark of God to Ekron, but when it got there, the Ekronites cried out, "They've moved the ark of Israel's God to us to kill us and our people!" The Ekronites called all the Philistine rulers together. They said, "Send the ark of Israel's God away. Let it return to its place so it won't kill us and our people!" For the fear of death pervaded the city; God's hand was oppressing them. Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven.

Many commentators think this was something like the bubonic plague with inflamed swellings of the lymph glands, especially in the armpit and private parts.

1 Samuel 6:1-9

When the ark of the LORD had been in Philistine territory for seven months, the Philistines summoned the priests and the diviners and pleaded, "What should we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us how we can send it back to its place." They replied, "If you send the ark of Israel's God away, do not send it without an offering. Send back a guilt offering to Him, and you will be healed. Then the reason his hand hasn't been removed from you will be revealed." They asked, "What guilt offering should we send back to him?" And they answered, "Five gold tumors and five gold mice corresponding to the number of Philistine rulers, since there was one plague for both you and your rulers. Make images of your tumors and of your mice that are destroying the land. Give glory to Israel's God, and perhaps he will stop oppressing you, your gods, and your land. Why harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened theirs? When he afflicted them, didn't they send Israel away, and Israel left? Now then, prepare one new cart and two milk cows that have never been yoked. Hitch the cows to the cart, but take their calves away and pen them up. Take the ark of the LORD, place it on the cart, and put the gold objects that you're sending him as a guilt offering in a box beside the ark. Send it off and let it go its way. Then watch: If it goes up the road to its homeland toward Beth-shemesh, it is the LORD who has made this terrible trouble for us. However, if it doesn't, we will know that it was not his hand that punished us—it was just something that happened to us by chance."

According to vv 10-13, the cows pulling the cart never wavered as the Philistine rulers watched them go directly to **Beth-shemesh**. Beth-shemesh is a Levitical city - a place where Hebrew priests lived - people who should be VERY aware of God's laws regarding how to treat the Ark of the Covenant. As the cows pulled the cart, the Hebrew people harvesting wheat were overjoyed at seeing the ark of the covenant.

1 Samuel 6:14-20

The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there near a large rock. The people of the city chopped up the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. The Levites removed the ark of the LORD, along with the box containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. That day the people of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the LORD. When the five Philistine rulers observed this, they returned to Ekron that same day. God struck down the people of Beth-shemesh because they looked inside the ark of the LORD. He struck down seventy persons. The people mourned because the LORD struck them with a great slaughter. The people of Beth-shemesh asked, "Who is able to stand in the presence of the LORD this holy God? To whom should the ark go from here?"

The people realize this is no game, that **Yahweh is holy** - different from all others, to be treated with the ultimate honor.

Yahweh's Powerful Hand is moved by Purity & Sincerity...not false promises or religious rituals.

1 Samuel 6:21-7:1 They sent messengers to the residents of Kiriath-jearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and get it." So the people of Kiriath-jearim came for the ark of the LORD and took it to Abinadab's house on the hill. They consecrated his son Eleazar to take care of it.

There is no record of placing the ark of Yahweh in a new tabernacle/temple complex as it had been in Shiloh. One man is set apart to take care of it during this time - Eleazar - which turns out to be quite a long period of time. Based on the context of what we're about to read, the people of Israel were NOT seeking Yahweh during this period of time. But that was about to change!

1 Samuel 7:2-4

Time went by until twenty years had passed since the ark had been taken to Kiriath-jearim. Then the whole house of Israel longed for the LORD. Samuel told them, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, get rid of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths that are among you, set your hearts on the LORD, and worship only him. Then he will rescue you from the Philistines." So the Israelites removed the Baals and the Ashtoreths and only worshiped the LORD.

What happened during the 20 years? We don't know, but it seems that the people had been deeply impacted by the foreign gods **Ashtoreth & Baal** - **Ashtoreth** was the female goddess of fertility, married **Baal** - the storm/fertility god.

Based on the context, they had continued to be oppressed by the Philistines. Ultimately, the whole house of Israel **longed for Yahweh** and responded in real repentance - turning FROM sin and turning TO Yahweh.

🔍 When's the last time you really sensed Yahweh's Presence & Power?

- › Are there any idols that you place above Yahweh? Job, money, family, or a hobby?
- › Have we somehow lost the AWE of God's Presence & Power?

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▶ **Start your day by hitting your knees & opening the Scriptures.**

Get back to the gospels and bask in the greatness of the Lord Jesus! Spend time talking to the King - praise Him for His graciousness - ask Him for His Presence & Power to be known among His people.

▶ **Consider answering the Discussion Questions and reading the passages on question #8.**

heretoserveyou

Have questions and need some help? ...real soon...how about now? Please **call** or **text** us soon!

- * Contact **Jackie** (850-673-1582), **Christy** (850-673-9764), **Caleb** (864-315-8015), **Gary** (850-673-2507), **Betty** (850-973-3266), or another follower of Jesus soon!
- * Or call our **deacons & wives**: **Alan & Christy Androski** (850-464-1428), **Steve & Debbie Bass** (850-673-7952), **Noel & Patricia Barnes** (813-767-2881), **Derek & Emily Beaty** (813-763-4421), or **Tim & Joni Hughey** (850-464-1156).

discussionquestions

These open-ended questions are designed to help you LIVE what you LEARN with your Family, Friends, or Small Group.

1. **Icebreaker - Unexpected Defeats:** Share a time you "did everything right" yet still failed. How did that experience shape your view of God's involvement in your life?
2. **Read 1 Samuel 4:3.** Why did Israel believe the ark would guarantee victory? What warning does this give about confusing religious symbols with genuine faith?
3. **Contrast the Responses (1 Samuel 4:6-9 vs. 4:10-11).** Who actually showed more fear of Yahweh—the Philistines or Israel—and why?
4. **Dagon Face-Planted (1 Samuel 5:1-5).** What modern "idols" can topple just as quickly when confronted with God's Presence?
5. **"Yahweh's powerful hand is moved by purity & sincerity."** Where else in Scripture do you see God rejecting empty ritual but honoring humble obedience (e.g., Isaiah 1:13-17; Matthew 15:8-9; James 4:6-10)?
6. **Personal Reflection.** In what areas might you be treating God like a lucky charm—turning to Him only when you're in a bind?
7. **True Repentance (1 Samuel 7:2-4).** What concrete steps did Israel take to return to Yahweh? What similar steps would repentance require for us today?
8. **Humility vs. Ritual.** The religious leaders had beef with were ritually righteous, but the people who received praise from Jesus were humble & seeking Him. Take a few minutes to read these passages and consider why Jesus responded to them like He did. **Read Matthew 8:5-13, 9:20-22, & 15:21-28; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 7:36-50 & 19:1-10.**
9. **Living It Out.** This week, how can you practice "purity & sincerity" in prayer, worship, and daily decisions so God's presence is more than a ritual—it's a reality?