The Ark Is Lost

Devotional Reading: Psalm 29
Background Scripture: 1 Samuel 4:2–7:2
Today's Scripture: 1 Samuel 4:12–22

I. Death of a Father
1 Samuel 4:12–18

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.

13 And when he came, lo, Eli sat upon a seat by the wayside watching: for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city, and told it, all the city cried out.

14 And when Eli heard the noise of the crying, he said, What meaneth the noise of this tumult? And the man came in hastily, and told Eli.

15 Now Eli was ninety and eight years old; and his eyes were dim, that he could not see.

16 And the man said unto Eli, I am he that came out of the army, and I fled to day out of the army. And he said, What is there done, my son?

17 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.

18 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.

12. Israel's battle with the Philistines occurred about twenty miles from *Shiloh*. One soldier leaves the battlefield and runs to Shiloh as a messenger. He brings news of the terrible defeat.

The fact that the soldier wears torn clothes and has dirt on *his head* signals bad news. People in the ancient Near East expressed grief and mourning in various ways, and we see one of those here. The same two words translated *rent* (as in "torn") and *earth* (as in "soil") are also found together in 2 Samuel 1:2 and 15:32. Other methods of mourning include fasting, wailing, donning sackcloth, and placing ashes on one's head.

13a. Living in a time before televised news and instant internet reports, those at the tabernacle and Shiloh wait anxiously for a messenger to bring an account. *Eli*, in dual roles as high priest and judge, is specifically named as one of those watchers. His deep concern is evident in his posture *upon a seat by the wayside watching.*

Eli's active presence beside the road goes hand in hand with the agitation of *his heart*. He is uneasy about the vulnerable position in which he and the Israelite elders have placed *the ark of God*.

Ironically, Eli's active watching

contrasts starkly with his previous inattention to God's warning. Although Eli serves as high priest and judge, he fails to control the actions of Hophni and Phinehas, his two sons (see 1 Samuel 4:17, below).

13b. For some reason, *the man* does not first inform Eli of the situation upon arriving in *the city* of Shiloh. In later incidents, bad news borne to leaders gets the messengers killed (examples: 2 Samuel 1:1–16; 4:5–12). However, the facts are somewhat different in this case.

14–15. Although *Eli* is nearly blind, there seems to be nothing wrong with his hearing. In that regard, he is alerted by the anguished cries of the people as they perceive bad news. Their vocalizations express their grief. We don't know if the messenger has said anything up to this point. Perhaps *the noise of the crying* indicates the crowd's discernment of the news, based on the man's appearance and demeanor. Eli misses these visual cues.

Eli's request for an explanation of *this tumult* is authoritative. Consequently, there is no delay on the messenger's part in laying out the details of the battlefield loss for him. The messenger recounts the particulars next.

16a. To flee from one's *army* during battle is to open oneself to a charge of cowardice or treasonous desertion. We may wonder whether the army had predesignated this soldier as the bearer of battle news, good or bad. If so, then he's not open to the two potential accusations. The text doesn't say either way.

Rather than go directly to his home in the tribal territory of Benjamin, the man goes instead to Shiloh, a town within the boundaries of Ephraim. The messenger explains that he did not merely leave the battle; he *fled*, running for his life. But this is not the kind of information *Eli* seeks.

16b. Eli is interested in the message, not the messenger! So he asks a second time for more information. His question is the equivalent of, "How did it go?" Eli wants the truth, even if it is what he fears.

Eli appeals to the soldier as *my son*, a term used to stress interconnection. A figurative use of the designation "my son" is also found in 1 Samuel 3:6, 16, and elsewhere. Eli wants to know the complete details, no sugarcoating or leaving things out. We might imagine his unspoken questions bubbling just below the surface: *How bad was the defeat? What has happened to my sons? What about the ark?*

17. The soldier gives the essential details, each revelation being progressively worse. We may imagine the strain this messenger feels as he relays the news. Not only must Eli's heart break for the numerous lives lost in *Israel,* but his sons are among the dead.

Hophni and *Phinehas*, two selfish priests (1 Samuel 2:12–17), were present at this battle because the Israelite army insisted on taking *the ark* (4:4). In association with their position, they accompanied the ark to the battlefield. Perhaps they were among those who carried it.

The last bit of news is the worst news of all—the Philistines have captured *the ark of God*. It is not coming home. The tabernacle's most holy place will remain empty.

In the ancient Near East, capturing images of enemies' gods was considered a demonstration of the superiority of the victorious army, people group, and their gods. Though the ark was not an image of Israel's God, nor His dwelling place, it did symbolize God's presence and provision. To the Philistines, the capture of the ark meant that Israel's God had lost—perhaps He was not the fearful almighty the Philistines first presumed. For Israel, the loss must raise the questions, "Has God's presence left us? Is the covenant null and void?"

18. The text now reveals where Eli was positioned physically: he's right at

the entrance to the city, beside the city *gate*. The news he receives there is so devastating that it shakes him to the core. Thus, he loses his balance and falls from his stool. Intense grief sometimes triggers physiological responses like this as the body reacts to external stimuli. With a sudden change in heart rate and blood pressure, Eli may have experienced medical fainting, a seizure, or a stroke. His age and his *heavy* weight combine with the fall to bring about his demise.

The statement that Eli *had judged Israel* formally connects his leadership to the sequence of leaders depicted throughout the book of Judges. The designation of *forty years* represents his influence over a generation. Samuel officially takes the position of judge and priest.

II. Death of a Wife
1 Samuel 4:19–22

19 And his daughter in law, Phinehas' wife, was with child, near to be delivered: and when she heard the tidings that the ark of God was taken, and that her father in law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and travailed; for her pains came upon her.

20 And about the time of her death the women that stood by her said unto her, Fear not; for thou hast born a son. But she answered not, neither did she regard it.

21 And she named the child Ichabod, saying, The glory is departed from Israel: because the ark of God was taken, and because of her father in law and her husband.

22 And she said, The glory is departed from Israel: for the ark of God is taken.

19. The devastation continues. The bitter news reaches *Phinehas' wife,* and her body responds to the trauma by going into labor. She faces the struggle of childbirth while actively grieving a threefold loss.

20. As Phinehas's wife's life slips away, some interesting connections may be noted. Rachel died while giving birth hundreds of years earlier, but her child lived, being (re)named Benjamin (Genesis 35:18). Now, as the wife of Phinehas dies, her child lives, and her death is prompted by news brought by a descendant of Benjamin!

21. This newborn is Phinehas's second male child, the other being Ahitub. They are the last of Eli's priestly line.

Fathers typically named newborn children in ancient Israel. But this child is now fatherless, so the duty falls to the dying mother. Names often carry meaning, and in her dying anguish, Phinehas's wife names their son *Ichabod*, which literally means, "Where is the glory?"

22. This verse seems redundant, but the repetition conveys at least two points. First, we note who is speaking: Phinehas's wife *said* that the ark's capture means God's *glory* has left them. Her perspective may well represent many in Israel and even seem generally true. However, the verse reminds us that this opinion comes from a bereaved woman who is succumbing to childbirth. Her words affirm the depth of her despair.

Second, repetition underlines a point. The name "Ichabod" is not just a footnote of history. It expresses the abject disappointment that God did not deliver the Israelite army as they had hoped.

This section of the account ends with a focus on the loss of the ark of the covenant. Perhaps if God were still visible among His people, they could hold hope for restoration. Instead, they face defeat.

The multiple tragedies that befall Eli's household fulfill God's previous message to Eli: "I will cut off thine arm, and the arm of thy father's house" (1 Samuel 2:31).

Involvement Learning

The Ark Is Lost

Into the Lesson

What is the ark of the covenant, and why was it so important to the Israelites?

In today's lesson, we will learn about the devastating consequences of the Israelites' misplaced confidence.

Into the Word

Read 1 Samuel 4:12–18. What does the capture of the ark symbolize?

What does this passage teach us about the nature of God's presence and power?

What causes failure and dishonor for the Israelites?

Key Text

[Phinehas' wife] said, The glory is departed from Israel: for the ark of God is taken.
—1 Samuel 4:22

Read 1 Samuel 4:19–22. What does the name "Ichabod" symbolize in this context?

How does Phinehas's wife's statement regarding the departure of glory from Israel reflect the nation's spiritual state?

When have you felt a sense of "Ichabod"? How has that experience shaped your faith and understanding of God?

Into Life

LAMENT

- **Turn to God** (*Address God*)
- **Voice Complaint** (*Express pain, confusion, or disappointment*)
- **Ask for Help** (*Ask for God's deliverance*)
- **Express Trust** (*State confidence in God's faithfulness*)

Use the elements of lament written on above to direct your self-reflection and prayer. Compose a lament for a time when you sought personal success and glory over God's will and glory.

Thought to Remember

God is to be trusted, not manipulated.