

STUDIES IN SAMUEL No. 6

1 Samuel 4:1-22

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Text Comment

We begin now with what is often called “The Ark Narrative.” Chapter 4 is the account of the loss of the ark to the Philistines; chapter 5 the account of its “pell-mell tour of Philistia” [Gordon, 24]; and chapter 6 the account of its return, after seven months, to Israel. What scholars mean by “The Ark Narrative” is that they think chapters 4-6 once circulated independently before being inserted into 1 Samuel’s account of this piece of Israel’s history. Whether that is true I cannot say. The most important argument in its favor is the fact that Samuel completely disappears from the next three chapters, even though he dominated the first three chapters of the book and then reappears in chapter 7 as if he had never left. That could be because chapters 4-6 were written independently of the chapters before and after it. On the other hand, chapters 4-6 do provide the transition from Eli’s judgeship to Samuel’s.

- v.1 The Philistines had settled on the coastal belt (what we know today as the Gaza Strip) at about the same time Israel was taking possession of the uplands. According to Amos 9:7, the Philistines came originally from Crete. Conflict was inevitable with two peoples laying claim to limited terrain. All the more was this likely given that the Philistines were a warrior people, real Spartans, and advanced in military arts. Later we will learn that they had iron chariots, though that would be a greater advantage to them on the flatter coast plain than in the hill country where Israel lived.

“Ebenezer” is an ironic prolepsis or anachronism here, as the place is not named Ebenezer until 7:12. So, to call it Ebenezer here is to remind the reader of God’s faithfulness to Israel later when she finally trusted him and to make more inexcusable what Israel is about to do.

- v.2 “Thousands” may be a term for a military unit of some smaller size. Nomenclature for military formations [e.g. legion, brigade, division, corps, army] is notoriously flexible as to size (In World War II, e.g., a division could number 4,000 or 16,000). The point is that we may not be intended to take 4,000 as the actual number of soldiers killed, in the same way that 30,000 in v.10 may refer to the loss the equivalent of 30 military units, of some size, perhaps much smaller. Some of the numbers of battle deaths in the OT seem very large, but perhaps we are reading the numbers incorrectly.
- v.3 The ark was a rectangular chest made of acacia wood, 4’x2.5’x2.5’, covered with gold, with carved cherubim with outspread wings on its lid or top. The ark originally contained the stone tablets of the law given at Sinai, a pot of manna, and Aaron’s rod. [By Solomon’s time only the two tablets were left; 1 Kings 8:9.] It was the symbol of God’s presence among his people. Gold-overlaid boxes or portable shrines are known from elsewhere in the ANE, but the ark was unique as a repository of the covenant documents or tablets.

Because “ark” is a masculine noun, it is not clear whether we should read “so that *it* may go with us”, that is, the ark, or “he may go with us”, i.e. the Lord, whose presence would be mediated by the ark. Either way, it was a gigantic theological/spiritual error, as we will see.

- v.4 The elaborate name for the ark is a flourish indicating the power that the elders of Israel attributed to the ark. [Alter, *Com.*, 22] It is viewed as the visible representation of God’s presence among his people, as it were, the podium of his Invisible throne.

- Hophni and Phinehas are mentioned by way of anticipation. These two corrupt men in charge of the sacred ark? Eli has reason to worry.

- v.8 Note the plurals, the false theology. They aren’t very accurate historians either, putting the plagues upon the Egyptians in the wilderness not in Egypt itself. But that is a common combination: faulty history and faulty theology!

- v.9 There is such a thing as masculine character! The Bible uses this same idea of acting like men, in the sense of being brave and strong, in several places where it has an entirely positive connotation.

- v.10 The word for “slaughter” is the same word “plague” in v. 8. But now the plague is on Israel! Foot soldiers were all that Israel could muster at this stage. It was not until Solomon that they had an effective chariot force.

- v.11 The death of Hophni and Phinehas, of course, fulfills the prophesy of 2:34, but even that pales in the shadow of the loss of the ark.

- v.12 A distance of some twenty miles. As the bringer of bad news he wears the customary signs of mourning.

- v.13 Eli feared for the ark! He knew the folly of what his sons had done! Despite his flaws, Eli, as we saw, was a devout man. The narrator expects us to note that he was afraid for the ark but nothing is said of his fear for his sons. But his sitting in a chair by the side of the road is a picture of his infirmity and his incapacity as a leader of Israel.

- v.14 Eli’s question ironically parallels the question asked by the Philistines in v. 6.

- v.15 A verse like this, adding detail in the midst of the account of one development after another, slows the action down and builds suspense. You find it a lot in Hebrew narrative, part of the narrative art.

- v.17 The NIV’s “suffered heavy casualties” is literally “great slaughter” and the word “slaughter” is another word that can also mean “plague” as in v. 10 and v. 8.

- v.18 Eli was a “judge” we learn (as the NIV margin indicates). A judge who was also a priest (as in Deuteronomy 17:8-13).

The word “heavy” is the same letters as the words “glory” and “honor.” Eli did not honor the Lord (2:29) and the glory departed from Israel (4:21). It is a word play that ties the entire narrative together.

- v.20 The curiously detached, indirect way in which her death is reported in v. 20 suggests to one commentator [Gordon] that her death was to be taken for granted, as another instance of the Lord’s judgment on Eli’s family.
- v.21 Strikingly, she speaks only of the loss of the Ark, not of her husband. She “inscribes the national tragedy in her son’s name.” [Alter, *Com.*, 25]
- v.22 The repetition in v. 22 of the statement in v. 21 focuses our attention on this most important fact: the sign of God’s presence with Israel was gone and God’s blessing was obviously gone with it! The verb the NIV translates “depart”, in most of its uses in the OT means “to go into exile.” That is probably the idea here, with the readers of Samuel either threatened by exile or having gone into exile themselves to Babylon.

The glory of God was the manifestation of his presence: light and fire are often signs of his presence in the Bible. Think of Moses’ shining face when coming out of the Tent of Meeting after speaking with the Lord. Think of the burning bush or the pillar of fire in the wilderness. But the divine glory is also represented by a cloud, as in the wilderness and as when the cloud filled the temple at its dedication and the priests could not minister because of the cloud “for the glory of the Lord filled the temple.” [1 Kings 8:11]

Not unlike the use of the word “name”, so “glory” came to be used as a virtual synonym for God. It was the visible representation of God’s presence, and so came to mean the divine nature, majesty, and character of God. The word itself has the root idea of “heaviness” or “weight” and so came to mean “worthiness”, the “weightiness” of something. When the angels announcing the birth of Christ sing, “Glory to God in the highest” they were ascribing to God the worthiness of his being.

Sin separates us from the sight of God’s glory. Remember how Moses would veil his face when it was shining with the glory of God. He would tell Israel what God had told him and then put a veil over his face. That was an enacted parable of God’s judgment of the people for their unbelief. They didn’t have a right to behold the glory of God. This is the idea of Romans 3:23 that we all memorized as children. “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” The NEB translates suggestively, “For all have sinned and been deprived of the divine glory.” On the contrary, when a man or woman is growing up into Christ he or she comes nearer and nearer the glory of God, reflects more and more the glory of God, because he or she is being transformed, as Paul puts it, from glory into glory. God and his glory go together!

So, when the ark was lost and Phinehas’ wife named her son, Ichabod, she did not mean that the visible sign of God’s presence had departed from Israel but God was still with his people. They had lost the Ark but still had God. No! She meant that the glorious God had departed from his people, had taken himself away. The loss of the Ark was no accident, it was God’s judgment. He

was sending himself into exile and God's people would be without his presence, blessing, and provision.

And what was the crime that God was judging by the removal of himself? It was the crime of domesticating God, of presuming to employ him as a kind of charm or talisman, as a power at your beck and call, rather than trusting him with living faith. We speak today of people who put "God in a box," but these people in Eli's day really imagined that God was in a box and that they could carry him wherever they pleased and get the good of his presence simply by carrying it to the point of need.

This problem would surface time and time again in Israel's history. The prophets would protest against this domestication of God which took the form of various ritualisms and, at last, a very religious people would be judged most severely and the surviving remnant sent into exile precisely because they had substituted a living, personal, faith in God, a faith that produces an obedient life, for a confidence that their possession of and practice of the external structure of Israelite faith would make God well-disposed toward them.

1. Isaiah 1: the Lord protests against empty ritual observance by people who do not love God and do not intend to honor him with their lives. The people were living in open contempt of God's law, but sure that all would be well if they just kept offering their prayers and sacrifices. But God said, I hate your prayers and sacrifices if they are not the expression of the loyalty of your heart.
2. Jeremiah 7: in his "temple sermon" the prophet warns against the notion that the presence of the temple in Jerusalem will prove some kind of talisman protecting God's people from their enemies. The false prophets were telling the Jews that Babylon posed no threat because the temple in Jerusalem would always protect them. And so the Jews continued to deal unjustly with one another, to live in conformity with the paganism around them, to defile God's covenant with them, sure that nothing really bad could happen to them so long as the temple stood in Jerusalem. Jeremiah tells them that they couldn't be more wrong.
3. 1 Corinthians 11: the apostle warns that the practice of the Lord's Supper is worse than useless, it brings God's wrath and judgment, if it is not the expression of a true, living, and obedient faith in God and Christ. The rich were lording it over the poor in the church, coming to the *Agape Feast* with their Gucci picnic baskets, eating their caviar and drinking their *Dom Perignon* while others, who couldn't afford such fare, watched them eat. They would even eat and drink to excess, get drunk. And then the Lord's Supper would come after *that*! They were defiling the body of Christ and the love of the brethren that Christ Jesus had summoned them to practice, but sure that if they took the Lord's Supper, God would be pleased with them. "Are you kidding?" Paul says, "some of you have already fallen asleep!"
4. James 1-2: "Faith without works is dead," James says to a very religiously observant community of Christians. Which is to say, observance without faith is dead.

And so it was much earlier in Samuel and Eli's day. The priesthood was corrupt. The impression is that the people were happy to have it that way. But, still, they were sure that they could use God to get them out of the jam they found themselves in and then go on back to their way of life – no matter that it was a very different life than God had summoned them to live. He was, no matter, at their beck and call.

Much of the story of the Bible and of Christian history since is the story of this same capital error. It is what Israel was always doing, what the prophets would recover her from doing, and what she would soon begin to do again. She would reduce God in his glory to a box that she should carry with her anywhere she went and make whatever use of she pleased.

The NT form of the church had no sooner got underway than the same problem had reappeared. And it would develop with a vengeance as the centuries passed.

The ordinary objection of Protestantism to Roman Catholicism (and Orthodoxy) is precisely this same observation, that the ritualism of these sects amounts to a repetition of the same error that Hophni and Phinehas made – putting God in a box, or a rosary, or the bread and wine of the mass, and imagining that one can use God to protect himself while, in other respects, paying little attention to God or to God's will or to God's love. [Now, don't mistake me. I'm not saying the Roman Catholic believes that God is in the rosary literally, or in the mass. Nor did Hophni and Phinehas believe that God was literally in the Ark. But they believed that God could be manipulated *by the Ark* as far too many have thought God could be manipulated by the Mass or the rosary, and the like. And they believed it with religious enthusiasm, hence the great shout in the Israelite camp when the Ark came among them! They were sincere in their confidence in the Ark, no doubt about that!] Living faith in God and the personal knowledge and love of God are replaced by operations that make use of an always available God for our own purposes. We can take God and leave him as we please, but when we take him, he must play his part on our behalf. Until very recently, you had Roman Catholics, and you still have Orthodox Christians in many lands, going to services that are performed completely in a language they do not understand and in which they have no active part, and those services leave no mark whatsoever on the active life of countless multitudes of people who attend them.

And, to be sure, this objection is as valid today as when Luther made it in 1517. Indeed, the entire history of the church since the Reformation would have been very different, and our discussion of Roman Catholic practices would have been very different over these past 500 years, if only from the beginning the Roman Catholics had been just as vigorous in reminding their people that no amount of masses or confessions or rosaries or penances, no amount of church attendance or offerings given to the church, no amount of loyal attendance at mass, will count for anything if the heart is not right toward God, if there is not a living faith in God that leads to a life of love for and submission to God. If Roman Catholics were always hearing that, things would be very different!

But they don't hear that by and large. Surely there must be some Catholics who have heard that warning preached to them, but very few and even they have heard it preached very tepidly by and large. With nothing of the solemnity and the emphasis and the constant repetition that this warning is given in the Bible.

But, brothers and sisters, the very same mistake can be and has been made by multitude of Protestants, who count their church attendance as somehow standing for a real Christian life, when, if the truth be told, they do not really love God, they are not actively trusting him for anything, and they do not gratefully submit their lives to his will.

Whether or not they would ever articulate this theory to themselves or to anyone else, it is what their religion consists of, the assumption that it is better off to go to church even if their lives otherwise have little to do with God, his salvation, or his will.

When we have an account like this before us – an account of God’s people (*we are not talking about pagans here; in modern parlance we are talking about Christians*) from whom God departs, from whom he takes his glory and his blessing with it – it is incumbent upon us to ask why. Why did the glory depart? All the more must we ask this if the same thing happens over and over again in the history of God’s people as the Bible shows us that it did and does.

What would the same error that Israel made here, that Hophni and Phinehas led them to make here, what would that same error look like today? We have no Ark to carry into battle. What form would the same error take today? Well, Paul tells us what it looked like in a Gentile church he knew – people who were treating one another badly, unwilling to live a consecrated Christian life, but coming to the Lord’s Supper assuming that all would be well with them and God because, after all, they had done the “church thing,” they had partaken at the Lord’s table. “Baloney!” said Paul. When people like you, with hearts like yours, take the Lord’s Supper, it makes matters worse not better. By dishonoring the rite with your hypocrisy you provoke God to wrath.

They lost the battle at Ebenezer, many died in that battle, the Philistines took control, the Ark was taken, Hophni and Phinehas died and so did Eli and Phinehas’ wife. In Corinth the departure of the glory was more subtle but just as real: people had died who otherwise would not have and the church that had started so well was torn apart with dissension and other problems. But, of course, all of that stands for a greater loss, one that can’t be seen and measured until it is too late – the loss of God’s presence and approval.

I remember reading in *Touchstone* magazine a few years back the reminiscence of a man who had been at a large ecumenical worship gathering and had joined the line to the front to partake of communion. He found himself standing in the line to the Lord’s Table behind a man who was talking on his cell-phone and when he reached the top of the aisle said, to whomever he was talking to, “Oops, got to go and take the Eucharist.” How is that attitude different from that of every other church member who somehow has thought that he is better off with God for going to church and participating in its rites even though there is little in his life that betrays true faith in Christ or love for God? And how is that different from what the Israelites did at Ebenezer, counting on the ark to save them when they had no living faith in God, nor the penitence nor the obedience that come from such living faith?

Now, what is the point of such a warning as Ichabod, except that you and I take it to heart? Is there someone here this evening who is as much as walking beside the Ark into battle, assuming that God will bless him or her simply because of the Ark? He comes to church but otherwise there is little to demonstrate a living faith in God? He will take the Lord’s Supper tonight with us, but not because he loves the Lord, not because he wants a fresh sense of the forgiveness of his sins, not because he knows he needs spiritual nourishment such as the Supper is appointed to provide if he is to live the life of holiness and loyalty to Christ that he so much wants to live? No,

that isn't really in his mind. Not much of anything is in his mind, really. But, truth be told – and he often doesn't tell it, even to himself – he thinks somehow he will be alright because he has done his “God-thing.”

Is there such a man among us this evening? Such a woman? Oh, I'm morally certain there is. The problem is pandemic in human nature and so constantly surfaces in the church. The tendency to domesticate God is fundamental to fallen human nature. And it is always resurfacing in the Christian heart. I have a moral certainty that I am speaking to someone or several in that condition tonight, so common as it is.

Now, don't mistake me. The sensitive Christian conscience always takes this to heart and imagines immediately that he or she is the one who has no true loyalty to Christ and is just going through religious motions. But I am not speaking to those who struggle to have a pure faith and a complete consecration to God. Everyone struggles there. We are sinners, profoundly. I am speaking of those who really have no true loyalty to Christ and whose attendance upon the worship of the church, whose interest in the Ark so to speak, does not touch the true, central commitments of their hearts and lives. You know who you are, if only you will admit it to yourself. Look then at Hophni and Phinehas and see what will become of you, if you do not repent and turn with living faith and real repentance to the Lord God.

If a preacher takes such passages as this one seriously he will make this warning to his people, and because there are so many such passages in the Bible he will make it often! It is a great danger, *the* great danger for religious people: to substitute religion for God and performance for faith. No we must deal in love and faith and submission with God himself, present by his Holy Spirit. Nothing less, nothing short of that. That is the lesson of Hophni and Phinehas and the Ark of the Covenant.