

“Sin, Exile, and Cleansing”
1 Samuel 4:1b-22
July 1, 2018
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pr. Nicoletti

We are continuing to look at 1 Samuel today, as we come to chapter 4.

I’ll read our text in two chunks this morning – first verse 1b through verse 4, and then after we discuss that, we’ll turn to the rest of the chapter.

And as I did last week, as I read I’ll be restoring God’s covenant name, “Yahweh” where it has been replaced with the title “the LORD” in all capital letters.

And so, with that said, 1 Samuel, chapter four, starting with the second half of verse one ...

^{1b}Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. ²The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. ³And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, “Why has Yahweh defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of Yahweh here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.” ⁴So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of Yahweh of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

Thus far the reading of God’s word.

Now, to fully grasp what Israel is doing here, we need to back up a bit.

First, we have to remember that things were not going well in Israel at this time. We looked last Sunday at how the priesthood of Israel had become corrupted, with Hophni and Phinehas sinfully seizing and abusing God’s people and God’s things, while Eli, the high priest, sheltered the sin of Hophni and Phinehas.

While there *were* faithful Israelites who continued to follow God and sacrificially serve others – we saw Samuel doing that last Sunday, and Hannah the time before that – we also need to remember that Hophni and Phinehas were not anomalies in Israel at this time. Corruption and sin were problems throughout the land.

First, this portion of First Samuel overlaps with the book of Judges. In fact, the events in this chapter likely occurred near the beginning of Samson’s time as a judge in Israel [Leithert, 36] – you might remember that Samson *also* dealt with the Philistine oppression. And the period described in the book of Judges was not a shining moment in Israel’s history. During that time Israel again and again turns to evil and idolatry – sin against God, and sin against God’s people –

and God hands them over to their enemies so that they might repent, turn from their sin, and call on him once again.

And the Philistine oppression is no exception to that pattern. We read in Judges 13:1 “And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh, so Yahweh gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years.”

In our text we find ourselves near the midpoint of that forty-year period. [Leithart, 36]

So, any reader familiar with the book of Judges would already know that the reason the Philistines had been allowed to oppress Israel, was to be a means of discipline for Israel’s sin.

In addition to that, Psalm 78, which recounts portions of Israel’s history, speaks of the events in our text in verses 56-66, and when it does, in verse 58 it also identifies the cause of God’s displeasure with Israel as being their idolatry and false worship. [Firth, 85] The psalmist writes: “They provoked him to anger with their high places [that is, their places of false worship]; they moved him to jealousy with their idols.” Sin was the cause of God’s displeasure with his people.

So, we see in First Samuel, in Judges, and in Psalm 78 that Israel’s root problem is their sin. They are not living faithfully towards God, or towards their neighbors, and God is angry. God has been faithful to them, and because he loves them, he wants them to be faithful to him. The troubles he is allowing them to experience are meant to cause Israel to question their path, to turn from their wicked ways, and to return in faithful submission to God.

And it’s in this state of things that Israel approaches the Philistines for battle. They prepare for battle, they go, and in verse two we read that they are defeated. The text is translated that four thousand men were killed. Some commentators argue that this should be translated as four “units” of men, with each unit being a significant number of men, but not necessarily including a thousand men – either way it was a significant blow to Israel.

And in verse three Israel comes back to the camp, and their elders, their leaders, ask exactly the right question – they ask: “Why has Yahweh defeated us today before the Philistines?”

Let’s appreciate that that is a good question. The elders know God’s character well enough to know that he was sovereign over everything – nothing happened to them apart from Yahweh’s will. They also knew God’s covenant law well enough to know that this could be a sign of God’s displeasure with them. God had told Israel in Leviticus 26:17 and in Deuteronomy 28:25 that if he was displeased with them, he would allow their enemies to defeat them [Firth, 86; Davis, 53]. And so, after facing a serious defeat, the elders ask the right question.

Or at least they *seem* to ask the right question ... but it turns out they don’t really. Because they don’t seem to wait for a real answer.

There’s no pause in the middle of verse three between when they ask the question and when they come up with their own solution. And so, the question seems to be more rhetorical than it is genuine [Firth, 84, 86; Davis 53].

And it's worth noting that Israel had several ways to ask the question in a genuine way. First, if you remember from last Sunday, they had a prophet – Samuel, who we were told in chapter four verse 1a, was known throughout Israel. But we are given no indication that they consulted Samuel. [Leithart, 55-56] Second, they had the high priest, who could inquire of God in the tabernacle. But again, we have no indication that they inquired for God's guidance through the high priest. [Jordan] Israel had direct ways to put the question to God – to seek a real answer to it ... if only they were really asking a genuine question.

And in addition to those options, they also could have reflected on the Scriptures they already had – not only the five books of Moses, but also the book of Joshua.

Because in Joshua 7, for example, Israel goes to battle at Ai, and is defeated. And what is the cause of their defeat? Sin is in the camp. More specifically, Achan has stolen from God, and so God does not go out with Israel's armies and they are defeated. In Joshua 7 the problem is an Israelite stealing from God ... and if you remember from last Sunday, one of the problems in Israel in 1 Samuel 3 is that Hophni and Phinehas are stealing from God. [Jordan; Leithart 59]

If the Israelites had inquired of God, if they had reflected on the Scriptures that they had, if they had even just thought about the state of the people and the tabernacle, the answer to their question would have come to them. Why has Yahweh defeated them before the Philistines? Because of their sin! Because they have been unfaithful to him, tolerating priests who steal from him and his people, while the people engage in evil and idolatry. [Jordan]

The right response to their defeat would have been to repent – to turn from their sin, to remove their wicked rulers, and to seek God's forgiveness through prayer and sacrifice.

But that's not what they do. Instead they come up with a religious technique that they think will work. They go and they get the ark of God from the tabernacle, in order to bring it into battle with them. The ark was considered the throne of God – in some sense he sat enthroned above the carved cherubim on the ark. And the Israelites decide that this technique will get Yahweh, will *force* Yahweh, to fight for them – if they bring his throne into battle, he'll *have to* fight on their behalf.

And to add insult to injury, it's Hophni and Phinehas – whom as we read about last Sunday are two chief examples of sin among God's people Israel – it's Hophni and Phinehas whom they have accompanying the ark of God into battle.

When Israel begins to face the consequences of their sin, their first response, rather than repenting, is to grasp at a technique that they think will be a quick fix for their troubles.

That is what Israel does here.

And we are not that different, are we?

We usually make the same mistake, don't we?

When we begin to reap the fruits of our selfishness, of our sin, we minimize our moral responsibility, we often don't even consider our moral responsibility, and we focus instead on techniques and technical fixes.

We see this regularly on display in our culture. As problems emerge, there's always a quick grasping at a technical fix to the problem. The moral nature of a problem is ignored ... unless one wants to blame it on *someone else's* moral choices. But we don't blame it on our own. Whether you're looking at the right or the left politically, no one seems to do any soul searching about how *their* moral decisions or influence may have led to a cultural problem at hand. It's always someone else's moral failure or lack of moral direction that caused the problem. And rather than ever calling our society (including our political allies) to grapple with our moral choices, we are always grasping for techniques. Candidates argue over who can best technically arrange the economy to work for everyone. No one calls us to questions the role of our own greed in where we are. (They might call us to think about someone else's greed – but never our own.) Parties argue over the details of the tax code and our national debt, but neither party wants to call us to live within our means as a country. While talking heads point their finger at the other side, and shout that they are destroying the country, no one calls their allies to step back and think about what loving our neighbor regardless of their politics would look like. And at root, it's not really the fault of the political leadership. It's us. We don't want to hear calls to soul-searching and repentance – we won't consider such measures. We want an easy technical fix. Like the Israelites, we rhetorically ask why things aren't going right, and then we grasp at a technique that we think will win the day for us.

The Christian church can fall in the same pattern. Skill and technique and structure are incredibly important to the life of the church. But when technique and procedure become the primary focus, and the Christian call to repentance and love fade in the background, we are like the Israelites, neglecting the Scriptures, neglecting prayer, and grasping at the ark to win the day.

We can do it in our family lives as well. I am a big supporter of how important developing certain skills are in marriage and in family life – learning how to communicate well, how to instruct and raise children, how to arrange the patterns of your family's life. But without a deep, heart-level commitment to put our spouse and children before ourselves, to love them as Christ loved us, those techniques are worthless. They are grasping at the ark.

Again and again we see this pattern in our communal lives: our nation, our churches, our families.

The problem couldn't possibly be *us*. It must be something else.

And we hold to those assumptions often in our personal lives as well.

When we see problems in someone else's life, we are quick to assume that the cause is their own character – something that is wrong with *them*. But when we see problems in our own life, our first assumption is that the cause is our circumstances – our situation.

This is a common pattern of human life observed not only by Christians, but by secular social psychologists as well. Social psychologists call it the “fundamental attribution error.” And the key component for us is that when we have a problem, our first assumption is that the problem is external to us, and can be fixed by adjusting our external circumstances. It’s the same assumptions the Israelites make in our text.

I do it. You do it. And when we do it, we’re wrong. Everyone looking at us seems to agree on that – from the Bible to the social psychologist.

But where does that pattern come up in your life? Where do you have a persistent problem, that you assume or insist is due to your circumstances ... but if you’re honest ... if you step back and look at yourself ... the problem is you. And it’s not just that you lack some skill ... but that you are failing morally. You are failing to be the kind of person God calls you to be. You are failing to be even the kind of person *you* want to be. You are acting in selfishness and self-worship, despite all your objections to the contrary ... and when something exposes that reality ... you are quick to blame anything but the state of your heart.

And so we complain about our salary or buy new budgeting software, when the real problem is greed and covetousness in our own heart. We search for a new parenting “methodology” and the books that go with it, when the biggest problem is our unwillingness to love sacrificially. We hope that a gift will pacify things with our spouse, when what we really need to do is to selflessly pursue their heart.

Where is that pattern at play in your life? And what do you grasp at as a technical fix? What is your version of “Let us bring the ark of the covenant of Yahweh [...] that it may come among us and save us?” Your solution doesn’t need to be a religious one ... it probably isn’t. It just needs to be a technical fix that you can use to deflect attention from the real problem being exposed – your selfishness and sin in your heart. Where have you most recently seen that dynamic in your life?

We can shake our head at Israel in this text. But far too often they are us.

So Israel has continued in their unrepentance. Worse than that, they are now trying to manipulate God with some of the sinful priests who have led to God’s anger with them in the first place.

A defeat in battle has not been enough to get Israel to repent. So what happens next?

Well, the same covenant law in Deuteronomy 28 that talks in verse 25 about how God will allow Israel to be defeated by their enemies if they rebel against him, goes on to specify what will happen if they continue in their sin unrepentantly.

In Deuteronomy 28:64-68 God says that the final penalty for Israel’s persistent unrepentance will be exile. [Leithart, 56] If they continue in their sin, God will allow their enemies not only to rule over them, but to capture them, and to take them captive out of the land. God even says that this could happen at the hands of the Egyptians in Deuteronomy 28:68. If we look back to Genesis

10:13 and 14 and we see that the Philistines were considered descendants of Egypt, and so a picture begins to emerge of what is likely to unfold. [Leithart, 57; Jordan]

Israel is persisting in sin, even increasing their sin after being defeated, by denying their sin has any real role in their situation – by failing to repent. We see that the proper sentence for their persistent unrepentance is exile, even at the hands of the Egyptians. And then we see them lining up to go into battle with descendants of Egypt.

The proper expectation for us as readers, if we remember the Scriptures, if we know Deuteronomy 28 and Genesis 10, the proper expectation is that Israel will now be exiled. It seems that that is what should happen at this point.

And again that realization should cause us to pause. Because it's what our persistence in sin deserves as well. If you are a Christian, you might find this idea kind of routine, and if you are here this morning and you're not a Christian, you might find the idea offensive. But the Christian Scriptures maintain that our sin – our selfishness and self-worship – leads to spiritual exile. It leads us to being cast out of God's presence.

If you're a Christian and that idea has become routine, reflect on it just a bit. Your sin, which you can be fairly flippant about at times, if you're honest, deserves that you be cast from God's presence in exile forever. You say you believe that, and you do in your head. But do you believe it in your guts? Does the thought of what your sin deserves strike you with even a fraction of the horror that it should?

And if you're not a Christian, then rather than be offended when the Christian Scriptures say that your sin, your rebellion against God, deserves exile from his presence, maybe consider that that is kind of what you want ... isn't it? If you don't want the God of the Bible, and if the God of the Bible actually exists, then exile from his presence is really just giving you what you want.

That said ... if that God is the source of all love, all goodness, all beauty in the universe ... then maybe exile from his presence is not such a good idea after all. Maybe exile from his presence is an absolutely terrifying idea.

In any case, the Scriptures were clear that Israel now deserved exile from the land – that is what we should expect to see as this battle unfolds – that is what the stage is set for.

Let's turn then to the rest of our text, 1 Samuel 4:5-22, to see how it unfolds ...

⁵ As soon as the ark of the covenant of Yahweh came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. ⁶ And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, "What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" And when they learned that the ark of Yahweh had come to the camp, ⁷ the Philistines were afraid, for they said, "A god has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. ⁸ Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness. ⁹ Take courage, and

be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight.”

¹⁰ So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. ¹¹ And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

¹² A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head. ¹³ When he arrived, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out. ¹⁴ When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, “What is this uproar?” Then the man hurried and came and told Eli. ¹⁵ Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set so that he could not see. ¹⁶ And the man said to Eli, “I am he who has come from the battle; I fled from the battle today.” And he said, “How did it go, my son?” ¹⁷ He who brought the news answered and said, “Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a great defeat among the people. Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured.” ¹⁸ As soon as he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years.

¹⁹ Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. And when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. ²⁰ And about the time of her death the women attending her said to her, “Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son.” But she did not answer or pay attention. ²¹ And she named the child Ichabod, saying, “The glory has departed from Israel!” [or, as the footnote, the marginal reading of the ESV puts it, along with most of the commentators I’ve read: “The glory has gone into exile from Israel.” The text goes on that she said this] because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. ²² And she said, “The glory has departed [“has been exiled”] from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.”

There are a few things going on in this portion of the text, so let’s take them one at a time.

First, let’s consider exile in our text.

We said that the people of Israel deserved exile. That’s what Deuteronomy 28 indicated. We said it looked like the Philistines, the descendants of Egypt were the ones that would take them into exile. We said that the stage was set for them to receive exactly what they deserved for their rejection of Yahweh.

But that’s not what happened.

What happened instead? Well, we see that in verse 22. It was Yahweh, the glory of Israel, the one enthroned on the cherubim of the ark who was taken into exile instead. [Leithart, 59-60; Davis 57; Alter, 25]

Now, just to clarify, it’s not because God was somehow restrained to the ark that he went into exile, and it’s not as if the Israelites did not realize that God dwells everywhere. That’s not what’s being said here.

But Yahweh had chosen to tie his special presence to the ark of the covenant. He had made it to be a sign and an expression of his real presence. And so when he allowed the ark to be captured and led into exile, it was the visible way he was indicating that he too was going into exile. He would go into exile with the ark, and his special presence would leave Israel, and be led away, captive, by the Philistines.

Israel had earned exile. But God went into exile instead. He went in their place. He took the punishment that his people deserved onto himself.

It's common for people to look at God, at Yahweh, in the Old Testament and to see him as harsh and exacting rather than merciful and gracious. But *here* we see Yahweh, here we see the God of the Old Testament: graciously taking the penalty his people deserved.

But of course this exile is just a foreshadowing of the one that was to come.

Because the Scriptures tell us that Yahweh experienced a far more severe exile for his people centuries later. Because centuries later Yahweh would take on flesh in the man Jesus Christ. He would come once more to confront his people over their sin. And once more, they would disregard his call. And as a result of his people's sin he would go into true spiritual exile, as on the cross God the Son experienced exile from God the Father.

He took onto himself the eternal Spiritual exile that you and I deserved so that we might be forgiven and have a right relationship with God, both now and in eternity.

The painful pill for us to swallow is that *that* is what it takes for us to be made right with God – that nothing short of the exile of God the Son from God the Father would suffice to pay for our sins.

As we said, we try to come up with other, easier, ways to manage our sins and offenses. We minimize their severity. We look for technical fixes.

But God has little patience for that. He sees our sin and selfishness clearly. He knows what it deserves. But for all who trust in him, who look to Christ in faith, he takes the penalty onto himself.

There is no way out of our exile without accepting his exile in its place.

And so there is no lasting help for our culture without the cross of Christ. We, as a people, have done terrible things. We have sinned. Every year on the Sacred Road mission trip I'm reminded of what we have done to the Native Americans whose land we now live in. As a nation we have sinned against the Native Americans. We have sinned against the African Americans who were enslaved, horribly abused, and then even after being freed were subject to discrimination and Jim Crow. We have sinned against countless men, women, and children whom we as a country have disregarded and failed to protect, and we have benefited from their suffering. We could go on and on. Who is sufficient to bear the weight of these things? We are not. While the details matter

in how we move forward, while practical remedies are essential, no technical fix will erase what has happened. Only Christ and his sacrifice can take the punishment that the sins of our culture deserve. And so it is only when Christ and his cross are central in our society that it has real hope.

And so with our churches. Our theology, and our good works, and the quality of our worship are all incredibly important. But none can bear the weight of our sin. Churches ultimately live and die based on whether the cross of Christ remains their foundation and their source of hope.

And so too with our individual lives. Nothing in us, and nothing we can do can bear the weight of the spiritual exile we deserve. No good works, no right opinions, no fighting for good causes. We are insufficient to bear the weight of our sin, of our selfishness. But God is not. And as we trust in Christ's sacrifice, in his spiritual exile on our behalf, the penalty we deserve is lifted. And we have hope.

Yahweh is the God who bears his people's burdens – who takes on the exile they deserve.

But God taking the penalty of our sin and rebellion is not the end of the story. It's not the end of his dealings with Israel in our text, and it's not the end of his work on us in our lives. It's actually much more like the beginning. Because a lot more happens in our text.

Yahweh was taken away in exile, yes, but Israel is not left unscathed. Israel is hit, and hit *hard*.

Israel may have lamented the loss of four thousand men, or four military units in verse two. But now, in this second battle, that number is dwarfed as they lose thirty thousand men, or thirty military units. Not only that, but those who survive find themselves utterly defeated, and flee the battlefield to their homes, in verse ten. And not only that, but two well-known priests, two heirs to the role of high priest are killed: Hophni and Phinehas. And not only that, in the longer narrative that follows we learn that the news of the capture of the ark *literally* kills the high priest. Soldiers and priests lay dead. "But wait," we might say. "I thought Yahweh was taking the punishment for Israel's sin onto himself. What, then, does this death and destruction mean?"

When we look at what unfolds here, and when we zoom out and consider Israel as a whole, what we see is that they are not receiving the exile they deserve, but they are receiving the cleansing that they need.

And exactly who died is an indication of that. The named dead are Hophni and Phinehas, the evil, oppressive priests we spoke of last Lord's Day. And the later indirect casualty of the battle is Eli, the one who, despite his apparently genuine faith, still sheltered Israel's oppressors by doing nothing about Hophni and Phinehas's sin.

Of course we must assume that the Israelites who died in this battle were a mixed bag – some righteous and some unrighteous. But the identities of those named who died give us an indication of the overall purpose of Yahweh in this blow to Israel. God is cleansing his people, just as he promised he would in Hannah's song, earlier in 1 Samuel.

Yahweh has treated Israel with grace, taking onto himself the penalty they deserved. But what we see here is that Yahweh's grace always includes cleansing. It never leaves us as we are.

Indeed it would not be gracious for God to leave Israel as they were. Cleansing was not a contradiction of his grace, or something balanced *against* his grace – his cleansing work in the life of Israel was a *direct result* of his grace and his love towards them, just as a surgeon's cuts are the result of, not a contradiction of, their care for their patients.

And as God worked in Israel then, so he works in us now.

On the cross, Christ has taken your place, he has paid the penalty for your sins. But that doesn't mean you will avoid completely the pains of spiritual death.

He has taken on the *eternal* death you deserved. But he also knows that residing in your heart is the pattern, the spirit, the seeds or even the roots of Hophni, and Phinehas, and Eli, and the idolatrous and unfaithful Israelites. And those parts of you need to be put to death. And so they shall be.

And we should welcome that. If those tendencies – the same selfish and idolatrous tendencies we talked about earlier, the tendencies that deserve exile from the presence of God – if those tendencies reside in us, we should want not only to be forgiven for them, but to be rid of them. And through the cross we shall be.

In our text Yahweh's taking onto himself the penalty we deserved and his work of cleansing his people are all tied up together. They can't be separated. In fact, his cleansing work in the lives of his people is rooted in his taking on the penalty they deserved. It is a good reminder for us that our growth in the Christian life, our progress in putting our sins, the Hophnis and Phineas in our heart, to death is not a separate movement from our reliance on the cross. Instead it is only by the cross that we can hope to see those sins cast down.

And as it is with us individually, so it is with us corporately. A true commitment to the cross of Christ leads to the purification of God's people.

That has implications for a church. It means that if we want to see growth, if we want to see spiritual progress, then we must cling to the cross. We must return, again and again, to the cross of Jesus, not only for the grace of his forgiveness, but for the grace of his cleansing – the grace of his work in our lives of putting our sin to death.

The other implication is that if we *do not* see growth, if we *do not* see cleansing, and if we *do not* see sin being put to death, then we need to ask ourselves if we have really made the cross our foundation as a congregation. If we have really made ourselves a people of the crucified savior, of the exiled God. Because whoever receives that God's forgiveness will also experience his cleansing work and will bear fruit accordingly.

Finally, what this means for the world is that the only way we will see lasting cleansing and transformation is through the cross of Christ.

We Christians should work for justice and mercy in the world around us. We should pour ourselves into works of mercy, and we should join with co-belligerents in fighting for justice in this world.

But as we do that, we must not forget that the basis of our hope is not our efforts, but the cross of Christ. God will indeed, as Hannah says, bring down the wicked in power, and lift up the righteous poor. But that will only happen in lasting ways through the cross.

And so let us be people of the cross of Christ, of the God who was exiled on our behalf.

Let us approach our own lives knowing we have no hope for forgiveness or for turning from our destructive ways without his cross.

Let us approach our churches knowing that whatever challenges we face, our hope must always be built on Christ's cross.

And let us minister to the world offering them mercy, fighting for justice, holding out a cup of cold water in a parched land, always offering them with it Christ himself. The crucified savior. The God of the exile.

It is only by him that we have mercy. It is only by him that we can truly change. It is only by him that we have hope.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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