

Arkeology – God’s Presence

I Samuel chapter 4 is about the ark of the covenant. The text mentions the ark 12 times in the chapter. Before diving in, here is my question today, has God’s presence left our nation? Now, I realize that is a big question and not necessarily easy to answer. But I believe our text does actually tells us the principles of why God chooses to remove his presence.

This chapter is comprised of two parts. Let’s read the first section, verse 1b-11.

Eli was very old, and his sons kept getting worse in their wickedness in the presence of the LORD. In those days the Philistines gathered themselves together for war against Israel.

Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle. The Israelites camped near Ebenezer, and the Philistines camped at Aphek. ² The Philistines formed battle lines to confront the Israelites. As the battle developed, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand of the Israelites lined up on the battlefield.

³ When the people had come back into the camp, the elders of Israel said, “Why has the LORD allowed us to be defeated today before the Philistines? Let us bring the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, so that it may come into our midst and save us from the hand of our enemies.”

⁴ So the people sent word to Shiloh, and from there they brought the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD of Armies, who sits above the cherubim. Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were there with the Ark of the Covenant of God. ⁵ When the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a shout so loud that the earth shook.

⁶ When the Philistines heard the noise of all the shouting, they asked, “Why is there this loud shouting in the camp of the Hebrews?” They learned that the Ark of the LORD had come into the camp. ⁷ The Philistines were afraid, so they said, “A god has come into the camp.” They said, “We’re doomed! Nothing like this has happened before. ⁸ We are doomed! Who can deliver us out of the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods that struck the Egyptians with every kind of plague in the wilderness. ⁹ Be strong and act like men, you Philistines, so that you will not become slaves to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Act like men and fight!”

¹⁰ So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and each man fled to his tent. A very great slaughter took place, in which thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. ¹¹ God's ark was taken, and Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, died.

The Philistines were a known enemy of Israel. But God had given his people victory many times in the past. What seems to be the problem here?

Well, how were the people of God supposed to go to war? If we go back to Joshua 3 when the Israelites were about to conquer the Promised Land, the people consecrated themselves (Joshua 3:5). What else did they do? They took the ark of the covenant with them. And what does the ark represent – it represents God's presence. In other words, it is like taking God with you into battle. And what does this imply? That God is actually instructing you on what to do or if you should go to battle at all. When Joshua conquered Jericho, the Lord told him exactly what to do to defeat the city. Was any of this happening at the beginning of I Samuel 4? Absolutely not! They did not consecrate themselves, nor did they inquire of God. In addition, Samuel disappears from the text for a few chapters, so he is not leading them. Who is still in charge? Eli and his two sons.

Now that I have said that, I want to point something out about the beginning of the text of I Samuel 4. The LXX, which is the Septuagint or Greek Old Testament, has more text than what we see in most of our Bibles. P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. suggests in his commentary on I Samuel this is because of a long haplography, which is basically a scribal error when letters are omitted when copying. The LXX reads, "Eli was very old, and his sons kept getting worse in their wickedness in the presence of the LORD. In those days the Philistines gathered themselves together for war against Israel." Now, this does not change the overall meaning of the chapter, but it does make the text more fluid and does explain that the Philistines initiated war against Israel. One other thing I would note is that this text is also found in the Evangelical Heritage Version of the Bible, published in 2019. However, the EHV puts the text in brackets with a footnote explaining the text is found in the LXX. The other thing I would note is the text demonstrates even though Samuel has been established as God's prophet, Eli and sons were going to be followed by the people for now. This leads to war. Robert Alter notes that verse 4:1b, "refer to a military initiative undertaken by the Israelites without Samuel's authorization." (Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*)

So, here we are. Israel is at war with the Philistines and they suffer a severe loss, losing 4,000 men in battle. Surprise, God did not save them. The elders are very surprised and even ask why has the Lord defeated us? And of course we know that the leaders had not even inquired of God about the battle, nor did they have the ark. So, what do they do? They decide to go get the ark from Shiloh. And the people of course believe it will save them from the Philistines.

But the clear facts here are that the Israelites are not being led by Samuel nor were they being led by God. In fact, having the ark with them would be a sign of God's leading. But of course it is not God's leading they want, they just want to be saved and have success in battle. Certainly God's people cannot lose if God's presence is among them. Dale Ralph Davis in his commentary on I Samuel calls this kind of thinking rabbit-foot theology. He notes, "When we, whether Israelites or Christians, operate this way, our concern is not to seek God but to control him, not to submit to God but to use him. So we prefer religious magic to spiritual holiness; we are interested in success, not repentance."

So, moving back to the story, the ark comes into the camp, Hophni and Phinehas are there – and I'm sure very pleased with themselves that they would be assured success. But if we follow their line of reasoning, they fought without the ark and lost terribly. Now, they would fight with the ark, meaning God would be with them. But, surely we should not forget, God is holy and righteous. Guaranteeing God's presence might bring disaster. Why? Because he is holy and sovereign.

Interestingly enough, Israel believed it had retained victory with the ark. They shouted and victory was just a step away. In addition, the Philistines thought a god had come into the Israelite camp. What do they say? "We're doomed! Nothing like this has happened before. We are doomed! Who can deliver us out of the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods that struck the Egyptians with every kind of plague in the wilderness. Be strong and act like men, you Philistines, so that you will not become slaves to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Act like men and fight!" (vs. 7-9)

And at the moment of Israel's clear victory, what happens? They are defeated again by the Philistines. What? How can this be? Is God asleep? Does he not care? Did he forget about his people? This time it was not 4,000 but 30,000 men who fall in battle. Hophni and Phinehas were among them and the ark was captured by the Philistines. Dale Ralph Davis notes, "The text forces two important implications upon us: Yahweh will suffer shame rather than allow you to carry on a false relationship with him; and Yahweh will allow you to be disappointed with him if it will awaken you to the sort of God he really is."

It honestly makes you think. We make all kinds of assumptions about God. Such as if we pray, God will give us what we want. Sometimes these ideas are even very spiritual. For example, if God would just give me more money, or a better job, or calm kids or better co-workers, and the list could go on. Then, of course, I could do more, bless people more, spread the gospel more effectively and so forth. Yet, we have to check our hearts. In this story, the Israelites are not following God or doing things his way at all! Should God give victory to such a bunch, not to mention the severe rebellion and wickedness of

the priests, which is likely what the story is really about. And if we accept that view, then we see again how the rebellion of leaders can cause major suffering for the rest of the nation. And we can certainly identify today with all the suffering that is caused by our leaders who refuse to listen and obey a holy God.

On that note, we will continue with the rest of the chapter in I Samuel.

A man from the tribe of Benjamin ran from the battlefield and came to Shiloh that same day. His clothing was torn, and his face was dirty. ¹³ When he arrived, Eli was there, sitting on his chair beside the road. He was watching, because his heart was trembling with fear for God's ark. When the man came into the city and told them what had happened, the whole city was in an uproar. ¹⁴ When Eli heard the noise of the uproar, he said, "What does this noisy commotion mean?"

The man came quickly and told Eli what had happened. ¹⁵ Eli was ninety-eight years old. His eyes stared straight ahead because he could not see. ¹⁶ The man said to Eli, "I am the one who came from the battlefield. Today I fled from the battlefield."

Eli said, "What was the outcome, my son?"

¹⁷ The man who brought the news answered, "Israel has fled from the Philistines, and there has also been a great slaughter among the people. In addition, your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and God's ark has been captured."

¹⁸ When the man mentioned God's ark, Eli fell backwards off his seat, which was by the city gate. He broke his neck, and he died, because he was an old man, and he was overweight. He had judged Israel for forty years.

¹⁹ His daughter-in-law, Phinehas' wife, was pregnant, ready to give birth. When she heard the news that God's ark had been taken and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she crouched down and gave birth, because labor pains had come upon her. ²⁰ As her death approached, the women who stood by her said to her, "Don't be afraid, for you have given birth to a son." But she did not respond or pay attention. ²¹ She named the boy Ichabod and said, "The glory has departed from Israel." Because God's ark had been taken, and because of the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband, ²² she said, "The glory has departed from Israel, because God's ark has been taken." I Samuel 4:12-22

The first thing we notice is the Benjamite coming to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dirt on his head. This messenger ran about 22 miles to Shiloh from the battlefield, and his condition was a sign of grief or mourning. Next, we find Eli sitting by the road.

Interestingly enough in verse 18 the text says Eli was sitting by the side of the city gate. So, was he sitting by the road or the city gate? It does make a difference. In the commentary by P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. on I Samuel, he translates verse 13 this way: "Eli was in a chair atop the gate watching the road, for he was anxious about the ark of God." Then in verse 18 the translation states, "Eli fell backward from his chair over the gate-tower." McCarter goes on to say why this matters. He notes that atop the gate means, "on the hand of the gate". The hands of a city gate are the two parallel walls which form the sides of the gateway. This is the position a leader would take to make a judgment for the people. In 2 Samuel 18:4 King David stood at the side of the gate or we might say on the hand of the gate to command the army. And this would also be the entrance to the city. Now, all of this may seem trivial, but it is an important detail. It explains where Eli actual was when he was waiting on news from the battle. And the text helps us understand that Eli was very concerned and almost seems to know that tragedy is about to strike.

Now, just in case you are not aware of the significance of this text, I want to point some things out to you. What we are talking about here in I Samuel is a major transition. We are moving from the Mosaic tabernacle to the Davidic. Peter Leithart notes in his commentary on I/II Samuel that the result of this loss to the Philistines was that Shiloh was destroyed. And this brought an end to a phase of Israel's history, specifically the Mosaic tabernacle. James Jordan in his work, *Through New Eyes*, notes that the Mosaic tabernacle was never put back together after Shiloh was destroyed. (James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World*) So, this is the type of transition we are talking about – we are moving from Mosaic worship to Davidic, and of course, moving into the time period of the kings. Leithart has noted that the devastation at Shiloh could be compared to the destruction of the Temple of Solomon by the Babylonians. Now, I am pointing all of this out so you understand the significance of this battle and the transition that is occurring in I Samuel.

Moving back to the text, we see that the messenger from the battle tells the news, and the whole city cries out. Apparently, Eli did not get the news first. Nonetheless, when Eli asks, the man comes and tells the news to him. In the text, the man tells Eli three things that have happened. First, the messenger tells Eli that the Philistines have defeated Israel, then he tells him his two sons have died in the battle, and the third things he says is that the ark has been taken by the Philistines. Now, if you heard that news, how would you react? You would, of course, be devastated. It would be the equivalent of telling someone about a military battle, and that their son or daughter had perished in the fight. Yet, that is not what seems to affect Eli. If we go back to verse 13, we know Eli was very troubled about the ark, his heart trembled. And the news about the ark is what affected him. Looking at verse 18, the text says, "As soon as he mentioned the ark of

God, Eli fell backward from his chair over the gate-tower. His neck was broken and he died, for he was old and overweight. He had judged Israel twenty years.”

Now, we mentioned earlier where Eli was waiting on the news from the battle. The text says gate-tower or back in verse 13, atop the gate or the hand of the gate. So the question is did Eli fall out of a chair and break his neck or did he fall over the hand of the gate, meaning when he fell out of his chair he might have fallen over the wall and landed in the street. Either way, the result is the same, when Eli heard the news about the ark, he fell and he died. The prophecy that had already been spoken by God was coming true. Yahweh was executing his divine justice on the house of Eli, removing his priestly authority and setting up new leadership. Can you identify? Do we now have corrupt leaders? Is God executing his divine justice and removing them from power, while at the same time preparing the next generation of righteous leaders. Are we in a transition time today? Where one era of leadership is ending and another is beginning. Is God telling his church their worship is corrupt and not pure? And that he is about to change that by establishing true, pure and righteous worship. Do we even know what pure worship looks like? Well, God does. The work is his alone.

I would submit to you that God is in fact purifying his church and preparing them for a new day. In the book of Samuel, David is not even on the scene yet, it would be many years before Davidic worship was established. This transition was going to take time. But the first thing God is doing is removing corrupt leaders. Their time is over. And I think it is important to remember, it is never about one person or leader. It is about Jesus Christ. He is the head of the church. But obviously he puts leaders in place and he removes them. Daniel 2:21 tells us God changes the times and seasons, he removes kings and sets up kings.

It is also very important to understand that Samuel was a prophet. And during his time he was the leader of God’s people. But he also anointed Saul and David. Put another way, God sends his prophet first to prepare the way for the Christ-figure, King David. In much the same way, John the Baptist was sent ahead of Christ to prepare the way for the perfect Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

The concluding verses of I Samuel 4 are very sad. The wife of Phinehas is pregnant and gives birth. She dies in child birth and names the child Ichabod. She says, “The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.” And as we close out this chapter, I want to ask a very pointed question. Is God removing his presence from America? And I mean this sincerely. If we were to look at the text and consider the principles around this idea, what would we say? What causes God to remove his presence – corrupt spiritual leadership. And you could expand on that to say national leadership as well because Eli and sons were the nation’s leaders. But remember the

corruption had to do with how the sons treated the worship of God and their contempt and rebellion in reference to the rules and laws of their priestly functions. It is so bad that Eli's house is completely removed from its position of authority.

And what about us? We live in New Testament times but that does not mean God doesn't remove corrupt leaders – he most certainly does. This passage is a sober reminder of how serious God is about spiritual leadership – those that lead the people of God. It is also a reminder of how serious God is about his worship. Consider this, when we meet together on a Sunday, or any other day for that matter, do we consider how serious it is coming before a holy God. Are leaders leading their people into true and pure worship, or are they leading people into a time of entertainment and fun. A light-hearted time using psychology and self-help books, instead of God's word. Are we really serious about worshipping a holy God? Do we understand what it means to honor a holy God? God is very serious! Are you – are leaders? The church needs to deeply reflect on their worship practices and how or if they actually honor God. Remember Eli honored his sons above God. Are we honoring people above God? Are we? That is not always an easy thing to assess accurately. We love people, but God comes first. What does it actually mean to honor God first, and still love people? We had better put God first, he is preeminent!

Consider carefully the next time you are at church, are you connecting with people and not God? Are you honoring people and think that is enough? It isn't. Many of us are happy to float in and out of church, talking with some people, having fellowship with everyone except who. Except God himself. Friend, that is very dangerous. Jesus is the author of our faith, period. What needs to change – we do. We need to prayerfully reassess how we worship. The reason God doesn't do more in our churches, the reason we have lost our influence in the culture, is because God is waiting on us to honor him instead of people. It is actually not as easy as you might think, God is invisible to us, people are not. That is why we must learn to see with spiritual eyes. There is way more God wants to do, but he will do it in purity. What is it going to take for the church to wake up and realize what they are doing is not good enough, and in some cases corrupt. We must honor our faithful God in humility, reverence, fear and awe. God always responds to repentance and I am pretty sure it is past time for leaders to get real, fall on their face before a holy God and see what he will do.