

“The Philistines Have Captured the Ark!”

(The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 73)

1 Samuel 4 – 7

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Young Samuel told his master Eli everything God had revealed to him: that God was going to act, and act soon, in response to the sinful and hypocritical acts of Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phineas. Eli had known what his priestly sons were doing but had not done enough to stop it. God continued to speak at that tabernacle in Shiloh, and Samuel gains a reputation as a trustworthy prophet – but even after Samuel tells Eli about God’s coming judgment, Eli *still* does nothing about his wayward sons.

There are times when God gives us a message, the same message, over and over again. There’s something that God wants you to change about the way you’re living your life, and you keep getting little hints – or maybe *big* hints – about what that is. These messages are important. They keep coming for a reason. Ignoring those messages isn’t going to do you any good. It doesn’t matter how difficult the transition will be, or how afraid you are of making the change. If there’s a change God wants you to make, *everyone* will be better off if you make it sooner rather than later.

That, unfortunately, was a lesson Eli had to learn the hard way.

“In those days the Philistines gathered for war against Israel.” (1 Samuel 4.1) It’s been a while since we’ve heard about the Philistines – they’ve been quiet since Samson’s decisive victories back in the book of Judges. But now they become a force to be reckoned with again. The Philistines attack and invade Israel, killing four thousand Israelite soldiers and seizing several Israelite towns and villages. The Israelites are discouraged: “Why did the LORD defeat us today before the Philistines?” (1 Samuel 4.3) Or, more bluntly: “Where was *God* today?” They come up with what they think is a brilliant idea. “Let’s bring the ark containing the LORD’s covenant from Shiloh so it can go with us and save us from our enemies’ power!” (1 Samuel 4.3) The ark of the covenant, that sacred chest containing the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, covered with a lid on which are two huge winged creatures. At that time, the Israelites believed that God Himself sat enthroned on the wings of those cherubim. The ark is to them not just the *symbol* of God’s presence among them, but *God’s very presence itself*. They think: *if we bring God here to the battle, we’ll be sure to have victory over the Philistines.*

So the ark of the covenant comes from the shrine at Shiloh to the military camp at Ebenezer, and Eli’s two sons Hophni and Phineas come with it. The Israelite soldiers shout jubilantly, rejoicing in

the victory that they *know* will be theirs. Their shouting is so loud it makes the ground shake, and the Philistines, hearing it from their own camp, cower in fear. “A god has come into that camp! We’re doomed.... We’re doomed! Who will deliver us from the grip of these powerful deities? They are the same gods who struck the Egyptians in the desert with every kind of wound.” (1 Samuel 4.7-8) Some of the Philistines try to maintain their composure: “Pull yourselves together and act like men.... Otherwise, you’ll serve the Hebrews like they’ve been serving you. Act like men and fight!” (1 Samuel 4.9)

So the second battle is joined ... and the Philistines win again. “It was a massive defeat,” says the biblical narrator; “thirty thousand Israelite foot soldiers fell, God’s ark was taken, and Eli’s two sons Hophni and Phineas died.” (1 Samuel 4.10-11) *The Philistines have captured the ark!* A messenger runs to Shiloh to tell elderly Eli the news. Eli, in shock, falls off his chair, breaks his neck, and dies. Word reaches Phineas’s pregnant wife; she goes into premature labor and gives birth to a son whom she names Ichabod – which means “Where is the glory?”, for she believes: “The glory has left Israel because God’s ark has been taken.” (1 Samuel 4.22) The word that the Lord had spoken to Samuel has come to pass – but the devastation is worse than *anyone* had imagined. *God has been captured by the enemy.*

There come those times in all our lives when it feels like God is powerless, like God didn’t come through for us, like the Enemy has won. We get a phone call – there’s been a tragic death. Our boss tells us to pack up our desk and go home. We don’t get the invitation, we don’t get the promotion, we don’t get the job, the money falls through. We had hopes and dreams, and we watch in dismay as they are ground into dust right before our eyes. We wonder: *Where is God? Is God powerless?*

Or, on a larger scale: Pearl Harbor is bombed, or Kennedy is shot, or the *Challenger* explodes, or the twin towers fall – and we recoil in shock and grief and dismay. *Where is God? Is God powerless?*

That was the question when the Philistines captured the ark: *Where is God? Is God powerless?*

What the Israelites don’t realize is that God is *completely* in charge of the situation. There was hypocrisy right in the heart of God’s temple, and Eli, the fatherly priest-in-charge, hadn’t done enough about it. So *God* decided to do something instead. That creates a *new* problem for the Israelites.

The Philistines take the ark and place it in the temple of their god Dagon in their city of Ashdod. It is a trophy of victory, and – so they think – a testimony that the Philistine god has beaten the Israelite god. But the next morning, the Philistines are shocked to discover the statue of Dagon fallen facedown on the ground in front of the ark. *God is fully in charge of this situation.* They set Dagon back up on his pedestal. By morning, the statue is on the ground again; this time, with its head and hands severed from its body. *God is fully in charge of this situation.* Then the people of Ashdod start getting tumors. The Philistines move the ark from Ashdod to Gath – but tumors and panic break out among the people of Gath. The Philistines move the ark to Ekron, but tumors and panic break out there too. The people of Ekron cry out: “Send the ark of Israel’s God away! Let it go back to its own home so it doesn’t kill us and our people!” (1 Samuel 5.11) So, after seven months in the hands of the Philistines, the ark is returned to the Israelites, who are overjoyed: they think God is on their side again. But some Israelites don’t treat the ark with proper respect, and pay a price. God is trying to make it clear: *I’m in charge here.*

That was the critical message the Israelites kept forgetting. They kept forgetting who is *really* in charge. They keep neglecting the covenant, forgetting God's decrees, worshipping the gods and goddesses of the Canaanites. God never abandoned Israel, but Israel constantly abandoned God. The crisis emerged this time because of two wayward priests and their lax father, who were allowing hypocrisy to reign in the temple. The actions of *three* people caused untold grief for *thousands* – but that's the way of it, sometimes, isn't it? Sometimes, the actions of a *few* people have a negative impact on *many*. Sometimes, a lot of innocent people get caught in harm's way. One man with an emotional problem and a gun wreaks bloody havoc in the lives of many families; a handful of terrorists bring grief and fear to billions of people. How much suffering and misery could be averted if more people actively listened for God's voice – and then *act* on it promptly when they hear God speaking to them?

Do you see how vitally important it is that we help people grow in their relationship with God? Share the faith? Proclaim the gospel? The more people there are who are earnestly devoted to following God, the less suffering and misery the news media will have to report. It's really that simple!

In the wake of the capture and return of the ark, Samuel emerges as the Israelites' new spiritual leader. The ark does not return to Shiloh but takes up residence in the town of Kiriath-jearim, under the care of a new priest, a man named Eleazar. That gives Samuel freedom to tend to other matters. A number of years later, when Samuel is fully grown, he sends word through all Israel: "If you are turning to the LORD with all your heart, then get rid of all the foreign gods.... Set your heart on the Lord! Worship him only! Then he will deliver you from the Philistines' power." (1 Samuel 7.3) He gathers the people at a place called Mizpah, where the Israelites offer a collective prayer of confession: "We have sinned against the LORD." (1 Samuel 7.6) While they are gathered there, the Philistines attack again. The people place their trust God; there is some heavy-duty prayer; and the Israelites secure a great victory over the Philistines. Israel reclaims the territory that the Philistines had taken, and Samuel takes a stone and sets it up as a testimony to God's great power. He calls it "Ebenezer," which means "stone of help," explaining: "The LORD helped us to this very point." (1 Samuel 7.12) Many of you know the hymn that recalls the story, like this: "Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I've come."

So things return to a semblance of calm in Israel. They are not the same as they were before – a whole bunch of lives were needlessly lost, three important priests are dead, the ark has been moved – but, for a time, there is peace. That peace will last *only* so long as the people are faithful to God.

Two things to remember: First, *God is in charge*. It may not feel like it sometimes. Sometimes we get caught in the crossfire of a battle being fought elsewhere, because someone else isn't listening for God the way they should. That doesn't mean we should give up on God; rather, it means we should commit ourselves even *more* fully to God, actively seeking to do God's will. Second, if God's trying to convey a message to you, trying to persuade you to make a change in the way you're living your life, *why wait?* What's holding you back? Why not make the change *today*? The sooner you make that change, the sooner you'll make a more positive difference in the world around you. *God needs you to make that change* – for his sake, for your sake, for the sake of this world. Why keep putting him off?

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