

**Message #11****I Samuel 4:1-22**

There is a phrase that occurs twelve times in this chapter which gives us insight into the main theme – “the ark of God” (v. 3, 4, 4, 5, 6, 11, 13, 17, 18, 19, 21, & 22). In five of these references it is stated that “the ark of God was taken” (v. 11, 17, 19, 21, & 22). It is clear that the taking of the ark of God is the key judgment of this chapter. **God let His ark be taken or captured by the Pharisees and it will be at least twenty years before Israel will get it back (I Sam. 7:2).**

The Ark of the Covenant was a box-chest which contained the written Word and law of God (Deut. 31:24-26). Closely connected with God’s written Word was God’s presence and glory (Num. 10:33-34).

What happens in this chapter (I Samuel 4) is that Israel loses the written Word of God, which of course means she has lost the glory of God and the presence of God.

**WHEN GOD’S WORD IS NO LONGER SACRED WITH HIS PEOPLE AND WHEN GOD’S PRESENCE AND POWER ARE NO LONGER OPERATIVE WITH HIS PEOPLE, GOD WILL SEND A JUDGMENT AND HE MAY REMOVE THE LEADERSHIP AND HE MAY REMOVE HIS GLORY.**

Let’s put this into this dispensation. When a church no longer hungers for a true, deep knowledge of God’s Word and doctrine, God has judged that church and His real presence and power will be missing.

When leadership becomes corrupt, God will eventually remove that corrupt leadership, but the problem is He may also remove His powerful Word and powerful presence. That is what He did to Israel, and he can do the same thing to any church. In fact, Jesus Christ warned the church of Ephesus of this very real possibility (Rev. 2:5). Jesus Christ says I will remove My presence from a church so that it no longer shines forth for the Glory of God.

When God’s Word stops being revered and when God’s Word no longer speaks and convicts, it is a judgment from Him.

We may remember that the last verse, **I Samuel 3:21**, reveals to us that the LORD was revealing Himself to Samuel and that everyone in all of Israel knew that he was a prophet of God (**I Sam. 3:20**).

**Verse 1** begins with a key reinforcing remark about Samuel, which is the only reference to him in the chapter. **What we learn is that God was speaking to Israel through Samuel.** This is very important to this episode because what we will see here is that **no one consults Samuel before they do anything here.**

Perhaps they thought he was too young or too inexperienced. But there is no evidence that any of them consult Samuel before they do what they do here.

Many people operate the same way today. They just make their decisions and don't consult God. They don't pray and they don't get people praying for them. Many just make their decisions thinking they really don't need the wisdom of God. Sometimes those decisions lead to disaster.

That is exactly what happens here. Now there are four parts to this chapter:

**PART #1** – Israel decides to fight against the Philistines and Israel loses. **4:1-2**

Israel did not consult Samuel in any of this. It would appear that they had a false sense of security about themselves and their ability to fight the Philistines. They were very self-confident. They certainly did not think they needed to repent of anything. They felt they were good to go and they could fight and win. They never took into consideration that in order to win, we need God on our side.

The Philistines were the arch enemies of Israel for the last 20 years of the book of Judges until the time of David. So they were the arch enemies of Israel for about 40 years. They are mentioned in I & II Samuel some 150 times.

The Philistines lived in the southwest land of Canaan dating back to the days of Abraham (Gen. 21:32, 34; 26:1, 8, 14, 15, 18; Ex. 13:17). The Philistines controlled five major cities – Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath and Ekron. These were military fortress cities and the goal of the Philistines was to conquer all of Palestine.

The Philistine oppression is marked by two major battles:

- 1) The battle of Aphek, in which Israel was trounced twice (I Sam. 4:1-18);
- 2) The battle of Mizpah, which occurs 20 years later (I Sam. 7:2).

That battle pretty much ended the Philistine domination.

What we learn from **verse 1** is that Israel went out to fight the Philistines at Aphek, which was located about 20-25 miles west of Shiloh. According to **verse 2**, the Philistines lined up to fight, and they defeated Israel, and she lost about four-thousand men.

There are some observations we want to make about this:

- 1) Israel did not consult Samuel or God before taking this action.
- 2) Israel had a false sense of security in that they trusted in themselves.
- 3) God is sovereignly permitting Israel to go up against the Philistines and did not prevent it.
- 4) God is sovereignly causing Israel to lose as a direct judgment from Him.

God is a sovereign God over successes and defeats. One writer said, when great calamity hits the church or the believer, it may be a process God will use to bring that believer back to Him so He may direct to His great blessings.

God is a God who is sovereign over additions and subtractions to a church. Both may be leading to His great blessings.

**People right with God have a healthy insecurity about themselves. They find their security in their trust in God.** Those who are foolish rely upon their own wisdom and plans. Wise people trust in the Lord with all their hearts and do not lean on their own understanding (Prov. 3:5-6).

**PART #2** – Israel devises her own plan to defeat the Philistines. **4:3-4**

When the people came back to camp, they reported to the Elders who came up with a plan. According to **verse 3**, Israel held a congregational meeting of sorts, which made congregational rule decisions. They came up with a plan to win.

The elders do not challenge the people to pray and they do not consult with Samuel. **There is no prayer and there is no consulting Samuel.** The leaders should have said we need to pray to see what went wrong and we need to consult with Samuel, who is getting direct messages from God. But they did not do that. They thought they could bypass Samuel and they came up with their own plan.

Their plan was they would go to Shiloh and get the ark of God, which contained the Word of God and they would take it out of the tabernacle and out of the Holy of Holy place and take it out on the battlefield with them along with the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas. They would be like their good luck charms or lucky rabbit's foot guarantee.

According to **verse 4**, that is what they did. They really believed this. They really believe that if they have their religious stuff with them, they will be guaranteed victory. But as one writer said, "Having the paraphernalia of God and having God are not the same" (Cited from Thomas Constable, *I Samuel 4*, p. 1).

Just because people believe something doesn't mean it is true or that God is in it. People really believe that by hanging a cross on a wall, or having a crucifix or rosary beads in the hand will somehow guarantee the blessings of God. People really believe this and they are wrong.

There is a "faith movement" that says, "If you really believe it you can achieve it." If you "release your faith, the sky is the limit." Well, learn the lesson here. Israel really believed it and they are about to be crushed.

The greatest phony belief of all is that people think and believe if they do something religious or do enough works or try to keep the law, they can save themselves. People really believe it and they will end up experiencing the condemnation of God believing that.

Had Hophni and Phinehas been real men of God, with any spiritual wits at all, they would have said no way. The ark stays here in the Holy of Holies. But they went along with the plan because that is what the majority of people wanted.

Frankly, sometimes the majority is wrong. Mr. Miles used to say concerning a good leader, “You must want the applause of the people, but you must never need it.”

Now the problem here is that God never told them to do any of this. He did not tell them to take the ark out to the battlefield. They didn’t even consult God or Samuel and we may be absolutely certain that this is not going to end well.

**PART #3** – Israel is confident and the Philistines are afraid, but Israel is defeated. **4:5-11**

We learn from God’s Word that a horse may be prepared for battle, but victory belongs to the Lord (Prov. 21:31). In order to have real victory, one must have the blessings of God.

According to **verse 5**, when the people saw the ark coming, they were all pumped up and excited. They were all happy and assumed they had victory. They are shouting and yelling and are all revved up. This is a very emotional moment.

There is something very important to observe here and that is, often before God sends His judgment, there will be a false sense of security and joy that assumes everything is okay.

If you go back to the days of the flood, the people were laughing at Noah as he was building the ark. People were eating and drinking and partying and thought no judgment would ever come. The same was true in Sodom. The people were so self-confident that they flaunted their sin.

When the people saw the ark, they believed and felt victory was certain. They are shouting and screaming.

Hophni and Phinehas should have been honest enough to admit, you know we are living immoral and corrupt lives and we have been idolatrous, we should not be going out on a battlefield assuming God is going to give us victory. That is what they should have said, but they didn’t.

According to **verse 6**, when the Philistines heard the shout and noise, they realized that it meant the ark of the LORD had come into the Hebrew camp. According to **verse 7**, they were afraid and they feared God and they said, “Woe to us.” The Philistines had never seen or heard anything like it. They knew that God was on the side of Israel.

In fact, according to **verse 8**, the Philistines thought they were doomed. They knew what God had done to the Egyptians. They actually said, “Woe to us.”

What is amazing is that these Philistine heathens have a better respect and reverence for God than the Israelites. But carefully notice in **verse 9** that even though they had this respect for God, it did not prevent them from fighting against the Hebrews.

So going into this battle, Israel is confident and the Philistines aren't. But when they went into battle, **verses 10-11** inform us that five catastrophic things happened:

**Catastrophe #1** – Israel was defeated. **4:10a**

**Catastrophe #2** – Every living Israelite ran home. **4:10b**

**Catastrophe #3** – Thirty thousand Israelites died. **4:10c**

**Catastrophe #4** – The ark of God was taken. **4:11a**

**Catastrophe #5** – Eli's two sons were killed. **4:11b**

This is exactly what God had said He would do. He would kill these two boys on the same day. He fulfilled this prophecy literally. We do see that prophecy may not be fulfilled instantly, but it is fulfilled eventually and literally.

The big question is why are all of these negative things happening to Israel? **This is a judgment of God because the leadership had become so corrupt that there was no sacred worship any more in the mind of God.**

**God is cleaning house and He is taking out people. Unfaithfulness had finally reached a point when God did something about it.** God is using the ungodly Philistines to chastise His own people.

**PART #4** – Israel loses and Israel nationally learns why. **4:12-22**

According to **verse 12**, a man from the tribe of Benjamin ran to Shiloh, which is at least a 20 mile run. Actually there is a strange Jewish tradition that says this was Saul, but the man is not specifically named. The city was in an uproar, and Eli, who is 98-years-old (**4:15**), wanted to know what happened.

Again Eli should have never let that ark be taken from the Tabernacle. But when worship is so loose, that is what happens. In many churches today, the same thing is happening. Many pulpits are removed as if they are just in the way of entertainment.

According to **verse 13**, when the man ran back to Shiloh, Eli was sitting on his seat by the side of the road and his heart was trembling because of the ark of God. Everyone wanted to know what happened. The man was running with his clothes torn and dust on his head, which is not a sign of victory.

According to **verse 14**, Eli heard an outcry and wanted to know what happened. **Verse 15** says he was 98-years-old and he could not see.

According to **verse 16**, the man said to Eli, I am the one who came from the battle line and escaped. Eli said how did things go “my son.”

In **verse 17**, the man gave Eli an accurate report:

- 1) Israel ran away from the Philistines.
- 2) Israel was slaughtered by the Philistines.
- 3) Your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are both dead.
- 4) The ark of God has been taken.

Taking the boys’ lives was one thing, but taking the ark of God was another.

Now when Eli heard the ark had been taken, **verse 18** says he fell backward off his seat and broke his neck and died. He died because he was old and heavy. He had been used as a judge of Israel for 40 years but on the same day his sons died, so did he.

Not only did that happen, but according to **verse 19**, Phinehas’ wife went into labor when she heard the news, and she gave birth to a son and she died.

According to **verse 20**, the women around her told her as she was dying that she had given birth to a son, “but she did not answer nor pay attention.”

She called the boy “Ichabod,” which means “no glory.” The reason she did this is because the glory of God had departed Israel. Her father-in-law was dead and so was her husband.

**Verse 22** says she said the glory has departed from Israel for the ark of God has been taken.

How did Israel lose the glory of God? They had corrupt leadership who did not reverence the Word of God and they did not reverence the worship of God.

The leadership was immoral, greedy and idolatrous and, if that weren’t bad enough, they thought so little of God’s Word that they removed it from God’s temple.

It is possible to lose the glory of God in any dispensation. It is possible for a nation, it is possible for a church, and it is possible for an individual.