

The Ark: Problem

The Ark

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Bible Text: 1 Samuel 4:1-22

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I do want to encourage you to turn in the Old Testament to the book of 1 Samuel chapter 4. And if you are a first time guest or visitor with us, all summer long we have been studying a subject matter that is very mysterious and very intriguing to most everybody, even those who would hardly ever even enter the doors of a church. It is this object, it is this item known as the Ark of the Covenant, this box, for a lack of better terms, that the Lord asked the Israelites to build in Exodus chapter 25 with certain dimensions and certain materials. It would be this box that would not just be an object, but would represent the specific, powerful presence of God. And what we studied all summer long throughout the Old Testament is this. What happens when the presence of God is in your life? What occurs when we are obedient to the presence of God?

And today we are going to come to a passage. What happens when we disobey or when we are away from the presence of God? We have been in Exodus. We have been in Joshua. We have gone into the Promised Land. We have conquered the walls of Jericho, but today we fast forward many, many years to the book of 1 Samuel chapter 4. We are just a couple of chapters away from Samuel the priest ordaining or commissioning or anointing the first king or the first monarch of Israel, a man by the name of Saul.

So we have gone a long time as far as chronology is concerned. But what is important in 1 Samuel 4 are the problems. And that is the subject matter today, the problems that can arise in our life by not heeding the presence of God in our life.

1 Samuel chapter 4 has 22 verses and I want to read the entirety of it so we get the scope of this story of what happens when the Israelites, the people of God, do not obey, do not follow and do not adhere to the presence of God properly.

It says:

And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out against the Philistines to battle, and pitched beside Ebenezer: and the Philistines pitched in Aphek. And the Philistines put themselves in array against Israel: and when they joined battle, Israel was smitten before the Philistines: and they slew of the army in the field about four thousand men. And when the people were come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, Wherefore hath the LORD smitten us to day before the Philistines? Let us fetch the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies. So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from thence the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD of hosts, which dwelleth between

the cherubims: and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the Ark of the Covenant of God. And when the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, what meaneth the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews? And they understood that the ark of the LORD was come into the camp. And the Philistines were afraid, for they said; God is come into the camp. And they said, Woe unto us! For there hath not been such a thing heretofore. Woe unto us! Who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty Gods? These are the Gods that smote the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness. Be strong, and quit yourselves like men, O ye Philistines, that ye be not servants unto the Hebrews, as they have been to you: quit yourselves like men, and fight.

And the Philistines fought, and Israel was smitten, and they fled every man into his tent: and there was a very great slaughter; for there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen. And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain.

And there ran a man of Benjamin out of the army, and came to Shiloh the same day with his clothes rent, and with earth upon his head. And when he came, lo, Eli sat upon a seat by the wayside watching: for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city, and told it, all the city cried out. And when Eli heard the noise of the crying, he said, What meaneth the noise of this tumult? And the man came in hastily, and told Eli. Now Eli was ninety and eight years old; and his eyes were dim, that he could not see. And the man said unto Eli, I am he that came out of the army, and I fled today out of the army. And he said, What is there done, my son? And the messenger answered and said, Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there hath been also a great slaughter among the people, and thy two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God is taken. And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God, that he fell from off the seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck brake, and he died: for he was an old man, and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years.

And his daughter in law, Phinehas' wife, was with child, near to be delivered: and when she heard the tidings that the ark of God was taken, and that her father in law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and travailed; for her pains came upon her. And about the time of her death the women that stood by her said unto her, Fear not; for thou hast born a son. But she answered not, neither did she regard it. And she named the child Ichabod, saying, the glory is departed from Israel: because the ark of God was taken, and because of her father in law and her

husband. And she said the glory is departed from Israel: for the ark of God is taken.¹

Today as we continue our study of this Ark of the Covenant, this famous instrument, this mysterious item that the Israelites were commissioned to build and to carry and to order their lives in a certain way, do you notice that statement in those last two verses? For the presence of God, for the ark of the Lord was taken.

And what I want to address today is this. How can things creep into our lives? How can things arise in our lives individually, as families, even as a church, a community, or yes, even a culture or a country? What are some of the problems? What are the things that can creep in so that when they come to fruition, when they come full scale, we can look back and say, “Oh, my, the hand of God has departed from us. His favor is no longer on us. His presence has gone away”?

Today is a lesson in four problems. The Israelites had all four of these. You may be only experiencing one. I want to warn you from the beginning, if only one of these things is happening in your life, don’t get excited and say, “Well, that is 75 percent. I am passing the class.”

Every one of these problems would have created the ultimate issue. Yet here in 1 Samuel 4 we had all four. So what are the problems that can creep into our lives in relationship to the presence of God? And the first one is this. The problem of restoration. Now restoration is a biblical concept. Restoration thankfully the Lord offers. By simple definition, to restore something is to take that which is decayed and that which is dilapidated and make it as good as new. People restore houses. They restore cars. They restore furniture. But yet the Lord is in the business of restoring lives.

Just like 2 Corinthians 5:17 makes this statement that those of us who are in Christ it says: “...old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”²

The Lord desires to restore us. He wants to make us. He wants to design in us what we were created to be.

You know, we hear a lot of verbiage today in our culture and I am going to go kind of corporate, so to speak and I don’t mean business. I mean our community, our culture, our country. But I think you can apply this to your personal life and your family as well. We hear a lot of verbiage about things need to get back to the way they used to be. We hear a lot of people spouting off a lot of words about how this needs to change, that needs to be altered, this needs to be fixed, because we as a culture have strayed from some basic general principles.

It doesn’t matter if you are Democrat, Republican or independent. It doesn’t matter if your passion is the environment or business. It doesn’t matter if it is education or the

¹ 1 Samuel 4:1-22.

² 2 Corinthians 5:17.

medical industry. Everybody has got this same cry and here is what the cry is. Something is wrong. And it needs changed. Something is broken and it needs to be fixed.

It is like when you go out in the driveway and there is the old car that you have got great memories of years ago. The tires are flat. The rust has come up and you say, "Well, it is about time we fixed the car again."

Everybody is crying that we need restoration. That is exactly what the Israelites did. In this story they go to battle. Four thousand men die. Not a good situation, right? So what they said is, "Ok, God, this isn't good, because in the past when we went into battle this didn't happen. I mean, Jericho, we marched around it. Boom. The walls fell. We are good."

All the different cities, all the different entities that they destroyed. In other words, from the book of Joshua 6 last week until 1 Samuel 4 everywhere they went, every ground they touched it was good. But all of the sudden the wheels have fallen off. It sounds a lot like our culture, doesn't it? The wheels have just fallen off. Here is the problem. I sense in our communities, I sense in our culture, I sense in our country and, yes, I sense in people's individual, personal and family lives that we have fallen into the same trap of Israel. Israel said, "Go get the ark. Let's do it like we used to do it. Let's go back. We messed up, whatever it may be."

And guess what happens when the ark comes in? Thirty thousand die.

Now you may be thinking to yourself, now, time out. Isn't the ark a good thing? Didn't God tell them to build it? Yes. But you read the first three verses of 1 Samuel 4 and you are going to find absent the same thing I see absent in our culture today. Everybody wants the problem fixed; they just don't want to repent while it is being fixed. There is no mention of Israel in the first three verses saying, "God, we messed up." There is no mention of Israel going, "We shouldn't have gone into battle without you, God." There is no mention of Israel saying, "You know, we weren't supposed to go unless you told us to go and we went without the ark and so you obviously didn't tell us to go and this was a problem."

In fact, in 1 Samuel 17, 13 chapters later, the famous Goliath/David battle, if you study that passage of Scripture the Philistines came upon the Israelites and the Israelites won. Here the Israelites go out against the Philistines and they get whipped. And so they say, "Well, we just need to gird up our loins. We need to grab the box and let's get after us."

No mention of repentance. No mention of sin. And let me just be real honest. I am about to get on my soap box here. I just want a politician, I just want an elected leader, I just want an appointed person to stand up and say, "You know what the problem is? Sin. The problem is sin. The problem is we have put God out of every house he was supposed to be in. We have put God out of every decision he was supposed to make of and I am going to tell you something. We look at our culture today and we say, "Man, 4000 men have been slain."

I got a prophecy for you. It is about to turn into 30,000 if we just say let's just change something or alter something. That is exactly what the Israelites did. They wanted restoration without repentance. And when you say, "God, fix my mess, but I am not going to repent," let me tell you what happens to your mess, it gets worse and it keeps going and it keeps snowballing. That is exactly what happened in Israel. There is no mention of repentance.

If you want God to restore that which is broken, if you want him to mend that which is torn, start with repentance and allow him to bring the restoration. That is problem number 1 and that is we desire restoration, but without mention of repentance.

Problem number 2 that can creep up in our lives in regards to the presence of God is the problem of reaping. You know the old adage, you reap what you sow. I want you to look at the end of verse four. It says that the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with Ark of the Covenant of God.

When they finally say, "Go get the ark," the ark comes with these two guys, Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli, the priest.

I want you to turn back to chapter 2. And I want you to see that Galatians 6:7 is true. God is not mocked. We will and you will reap what we sow. These two men were carrying the powerful presence of God. Can I just be honest with you? They had no business bearing those staves. They had no business transporting it.

Go back to chapter 2 and I want to show you the lives of these two guys. I want you to begin at verse 23. We are going to begin at the end. This is Eli talking to his two sons. "And he said unto them, why do ye such things? For I hear of your evil dealings by all this people."³

Now you all know what all the word all means, right? It means all. So Eli is saying that your reputation, guys, everybody knows that you are crooks. Everybody knows that you are messed up. Everybody knows that you are the furthest thing from God possible. Yet when they show up with the Ark of the Covenant, nobody was concerned, nobody called them out. Nobody said, "Hey, I am glad we got the ark, but if you let those two guys carry it, we are in a big mess."

Nobody said anything yet everybody knew what they were doing. And the law of reaping basically means this. If you continue on the path you are on, you are eventually going to get to the destination at the end of the road.

There were two areas that Hophni and Phinehas had in their life, laws of reaping that I see so permeated in the world today. Number one; go to 1 Samuel 2:15. It says: "Also before they burnt the fat."⁴

³ 1 Samuel 2:23.

⁴ 1 Samuel 2:15.

This is about the offering that was brought.

...the priest's servant came, and said to the man that sacrificed, Give flesh to roast for the priest; for he will not have sodden flesh of thee, but raw. And if any man said unto him, Let them not fail to burn the fat presently, and then take as much as thy soul desireth; then he would answer him, Nay; but thou shalt give it me now: and if not, I will take it by force. Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD: for men abhorred the offering of the LORD.⁵

Let me share with you the background of what is happening. In those days like Malachi 3 when it said bring all the tithe in the storehouse, we equate that to financial resources today, but back in those days we are talking fruit, vegetables, grains, and livestock. Ok? They would bring those items and what the priests, what the Levites did, what Hophni, Phinehas and their dad Eli did, is that a portion of the offering was to go to them to survive because they didn't have a, "secular" job. And then a portion went to the family that brought it and then a portion was sacrificed unto the Lord. And the Lord had a very specific rule for Hophni and Phinehas. He said, "I need you to take a three pronged fleshhook and I need you to scoop it down in there and whatever comes out it is yours, Hophni and Phinehas. Take it. You are good to go. The rest offer it unto me."

In this passage of Scripture Hophni and Phinehas took out the measure and then said, "We want more." In other words the problem in their life—and I see it all throughout our culture today—is they think they need more than God told them they need. They think that somehow, someway, God doesn't know what he is talking about. I need more to eat than just that one scoop. I need more of this. I need more of that.

Let me share with you really honestly what the Bible says. The Bible says the Lord says that he has commissioned, that he has commanded us that we can perfectly wonderfully live on 90 percent of all that he gives us. But we say, "No, no, no, God, you don't understand. Times are tough. I need 95 percent. In fact, I need the whole thing, God."

Do you realize that when these men abhorred the offering of God they were looking God in the face and saying, "God, you don't know what you are talking about. Times are tough. I am hungry. I need more.

What did the Lord say? You abhor the offering.

I could go on and belabor this time after time after time, but I just want to share with you real briefly. I have had two men in our church family in the last couple of weeks, two men independently of each other, both come to me. Their businesses are what we would call the construction trade. And can we just say that field has taken a whipping the last couple of four, five years? Without me soliciting it, without me probing them, both of them came up to me with this testimony. They said that throughout the last couple of

⁵ 1 Samuel 2:15-17.

years it has been the toughest time we have ever been through in our business. They said, “But we have been faithful to God. We have been trusting God.” And both of them said, “We are convinced the only reason our business is still in existence is because we put it in God’s hands and not ours.”

What Phinehas and Hophni did is they said, “God, you don’t... No, no, no. God, you don’t know. We need to put this in our own hands, because we are hungry.” What they did is they reaped greed. They reaped selfishness. They reaped materialism, because they said, “God, obviously, you don’t realize I need more than you think I do.”

That is issue number one that we will reap what we sow. Issue number two is not going to be as fun, verse 22.

“Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel; and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation.”⁶

The two areas that these men were rebelling against God were in the areas of their, “financial” resources and in the area of their bodies. They were mishandling the body that God gave them.

Understand me and hear me very clearly. The Lord has given us very specific instructions about physical intimacy. He has said that it is between a husband and his wife and that is it, not before you are married and not somebody else while you are married and not somebody that looks just like you in the mirror. None of those. And if that occurs, the same thing happens in our life that happened in their lives. We will reap what we sow.

And here is the scary part. Verse 23. Everybody knew what was going on and nobody seemed to care. I bet you they cared when they dug the graves of 30,000 footmen. Why? Because they thought it is no big deal. We will just keep going the way we are going and it will be fine.

Listen. God is not mocked. You reap what you sow. Verse eight of Galatians six says if you sow unto the flesh, you will reap things of the flesh. If you sow unto the spirit, you will reap things of the spirit.

So sometimes it is restoration without repentance. Sometimes it is the problem of reaping. But there is a third issue that the Israelites got caught up in. I call it the problem of ritual.

I want you to go back to chapter four verses five and six. It says:

And when the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, What meaneth the

⁶ 1 Samuel 2:22.

noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews? And they understood that the ark of the LORD was come into the camp.⁷

You have a group of people who are not repenting of their sins. You have a group of people at least representing with Hophni and Phinehas who are rebelling against God in two subject matters that God deals a lot with in all in the Bible.

And, number 3, they said, “Well, it has worked in the past; surely it will work in the present.”

And what they did is they just did what they had always done. Go get the ark.

Now you all know the definition of insanity, right? Doing the same thing over and over again, just expecting different results. They thought that if they went through the motions, if they just checked off the box, if there was just a ritual in their lives, everything would work out fine.

I know I have shared with you in the past that as I was growing up, particularly as a teenager, my sport of choice was baseball. And I am from a baseball town. And baseball was king in our town. More people came to baseball games than they did football games. That was then. It is a little different now.

My junior year in high school our baseball team that used to be and was supposed to be very good was not doing very well. You know, in baseball there are really two seasons. (There is before you play your district or your conference play and then there is all the competition within your local area region.) As we were in that first half of the season, we were on a losing streak that our high school had not seen in years. We couldn't hit the broad side of a barn. I mean, we just couldn't beat anybody. We couldn't beat ourselves. That is how bad we were. I mean, we kept losing, kept losing.

One Friday night the game is over. We have lost again. We are preparing the field, because it was our home field and we are getting home plate fixed and I am there with the assistant coach. Now the assistant coach to the best of my knowledge was a believer. The assistant coach at least talked things of the Lord. The head coach did not.

So we are sitting there fixing home plate and getting all the dirt and I looked up at the assistant coach and I said, “Coach,” I said, “If I am overstepping my bounds, please forgive me.” I said, “But I need to talk to you about something in regards to this losing streak.”

He said, “Sure, what is it?”

And I said, “Coach, we have practiced longer. You all screamed at us louder.” I said, “Have we ever thought of praying?”

⁷ 1 Samuel 4:5-6.

Now this is a believer. He looked up at me and he said, “You know, that may not be a bad idea.” He said, “I will talk to the head coach about it.”

The next game right before we hit the field, this man who had no semblance of a relationship with Jesus Christ whatsoever, the head coach pulls all the team together and says, “All right, guys, before the game tonight we are going to pray.”

I was shocked, number one that he is going to pray, number two that he actually did it. And he decided to lead us out loud in what we know as the Lord’s Prayer.

“Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.”⁸

We are chanting this thing as a team, right? Guess what happened that night. We won. And we prayed every other game. Why? Because Jesus had become a good luck charm. Jesus had become a superstition. Slap it on your bumper; wear it around your neck. Don’t forget it on your t-shirt. That will bring you good business.

We get caught in that, don’t we? Just throw a little Jesus on it and that will season the pot. And that is a bad place to find ourselves where we say, “Well, things aren’t going well and I am not going to repent of my sin and I am not going to admit I am doing things I shouldn’t be doing, but I am going to slap a bumper sticker on the truck and that is going to fix everything.”

No, it is not going to fix everything. It is just going to get people to give you the universal sign of love as they pass you on the highway.

Ritual instead of relationship kills. They had no relationship. They just had a ritual, which leads to the final problem; the final issue that happened in their lives was the problem of reality. And I think you and I and I think our church, I think our culture, I think our community, we need a real good dose of reality this morning, because we can talk about where we have used to have been. We can talk about where we want to be, but here is the reality. Where are we?

And I want you to look in verse 18 of chapter four of 1 Samuel. It says:

And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God, that he fell from off the seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck brake, and he died: for he was an old man, and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years.

And his daughter in law, Phinehas’ wife, was with child, near to be delivered: and when she heard the tidings that the ark of God was taken, and that her father in law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and travailed; for her pains came upon her. And about the time of her

⁸ Matthew 6:9; Luke 11:2.

death the women that stood by her said unto her, Fear not; for thou hast born a son.

In other words, problem solved: restoration. We can fix this, right? The guys are dead, we have got a new one we can raise up. In other words, hey, we can do this without God. Listen to what this wise woman said.

The end of verse 20.

But she answered not, neither did she regard it. And she named the child Ichabod, saying, the glory is departed from Israel: because the ark of God was taken, and because of her father in law and her husband. And she said the glory is departed from Israel: for the ark of God is taken.⁹

Let me tell you how to get the glory of God to depart from your life. Do any of the things that these guys were doing. Want God to just fix your mess without repentance? Keep sowing and you will eventually reap what Hophni and Phinehas did or just get into a ritualistic mentality rather than a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Guess what will happen? The glory of God will depart. The presence of God will no longer be present and you will no longer have that fellowship. You will no longer have that walk with him.

You know, I get people asking me this question all the time. And it is a serious question. They mean it. They say, “Jeff, do you think that God has taken his hand off America?”

I used to have to pray about that and I don’t have to anymore.

You say, “Why don’t you have to pray about that anymore?”

Because we are just like 1 Samuel chapter four. We turned into 1 Samuel 4. We have turned into a group of people who said, “We just want it fixed without repentance. We just want it solved without changing our lifestyle.” And you can stick a little Jesus sticker on it if that makes you feel better, but don’t expect us to.

Let me share with you something. It is a scary place when the glory of God departs.

You know this last week I found myself in Central America. I was part of the roofing committee of the building project. And as I was sitting there with a team of seven men that we had down there building those houses for those individuals, you know, I had a lot of time to think. I had a lot of time to pray as we built those houses. The way you build them, if you ever get the opportunity to go, is as soon as house number one is being finished, they kind of start on house number two, because it only takes a couple of guys at the end, because you are just doing some finishing work.

⁹ 1 Samuel 4:20-22.

I was a part of the group that was finishing house number one. And I had been discouraged all day long because the lady whose house we were building, we were building for her, she had not smiled. She had not seemed grateful. She had not seemed appreciative. I am thinking, here I am on the hot roof in the hot sun in the middle of Central America. At least smile at me and let me know this is a good idea.

We got done with everything and I was walking down. I was the last man at the house. I am walking out the front door of the house. I have got my tool belt. I am going to house number two when behind me I heard, "Senor, senor..." And I turned around expecting maybe there was a leak in the roof. Maybe there was a problem with the side. She had a little plastic card with her about the size of a 3 x 5 index card. It was the placard that they put on their houses to show that it can have electricity. And for the first time she smiled.

Why? Because she recognized something that you and I desperately need to recognize. That a house without power will never be a home. A house without the presence of power is just sticks and bricks and steel. The Bible says that unless the Lord builds the house the builders build in vain.

The Bible says in 1 Corinthians chapter there is no foundation whereby we must build our lives upon than the foundation of Jesus Christ. That works for your life, your family's life, your community's life and this country's life. And the problem is we have got a lot of pretty houses with no power. We have got a lot of pretty lives with no power. The glory has departed in many people's lives. The glory has departed in many community's lives and we keep trying to fix it with the same old ways.

Let me show you how to fix it. You can throw money at it. You can change leadership. It is not going to make a hill of difference, folks, until the people of God get on their knees and say, "Help us, God. We need your power not ours anymore."