

1 Samuel 4-5

- Our introduction to Samuel is complete and we're ready to follow the man into his career as judge and prophet of Israel
 - The young man is now grown
 - He is a prophet and he is judging Israel alongside Samson at this time
 - But Israel's age of judges is drawing to a close
 - And the dawn of a new period is here
 - The seeds of that change will be sown in the events of Chapters 4-6, which cover the wanderings of the Ark
 - The Ark features prominently throughout the books of Samuel
 - The Ark's circumstances serve to illustrate a key deficit in Jewish society
 - Over the past 300 years, the people of Israel have forgotten the power and authority of the Lord Who rules and guides His people
 - The days of Moses and Joshua are a distant memory
 - And in their place, the people now think only of themselves and their place in the world in terms no different than the surrounding cultures
 - As we've seen with Eli and his sons, the tabernacle in Shiloh and the sacrificial system centered on that modest building are merely ritual for many
 - The judges are viewed principally as military captains
 - And Jewish society has lost virtually any concept of God present among them, much less ruling over them
- But the Lord is still faithful despite the unfaithfulness of the people
 - So He's about to reassert Himself among the people by means of the most visible evidence of His presence and power within Israel
 - The Ark is the visible evidence of God dwelling with His people

- When it sits in the Holy of Holies, it supports the glory of God
- And wherever it goes, it displays God's power among the nations
- But Israel has long ago departed from an understanding of the Ark's true purpose and meaning
 - So in these days, the Ark is little more than a religious relic
 - It has become mystical rather than meaningful
 - As happens any time men move from relationship to religion
 - From worshipping God to worshipping images
- So the next three chapters show the people of God acting as pagans, while the neighboring pagans recognize the work of the living God

1Sam. 3:21 And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, because the LORD revealed Himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.

1Sam. 4:1 Thus the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle and camped beside Ebenezer while the Philistines camped in Aphek.

1Sam. 4:2 The Philistines drew up in battle array to meet Israel. When the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines who killed about four thousand men on the battlefield.

1Sam. 4:3 When the people came into the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us take to ourselves from Shiloh the ark of the covenant of the LORD, that it may come among us and deliver us from the power of our enemies."

1Sam. 4:4 So the people sent to Shiloh, and from there they carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts who sits above the cherubim; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

- The transition into our story happens at the end of Chapter 3, when we're told the Lord appears to Samuel at Shiloh again
 - The Lord appeared to Samuel as a boy earlier in Chapter 3
 - And thereafter, the Lord continued to make Himself known to Samuel as he ministered in the tabernacle
 - During this time the Lord is revealing His word to Samuel such that what Samuel would speak became equivalent to the Lord's word

- Notice in v.1 that the word of the Lord has now just become the word of Samuel
 - The Lord's will and purposes are now being made known among His people through His word given to a prophet in Shiloh
 - This is the first time the Lord has spoken in this way for over 300 years
 - Remember, Samson is still ruling Israel as a judge
 - But it's Samuel that is speaking for the Lord in this time
- Meanwhile, the people of Israel are thinking and acting as if the Lord's will is a mystery no one can solve
 - At the end of v.1 Israel is in conflict with the Philistines, who control the western plains of Canaan
 - The Philistines were fierce enemies of Israel in the land
 - They were a people group that originated from Crete in present-day Greece
 - They sailed their way to Canaan as early as Abraham's time
 - But the Philistines didn't take over large portions of western Canaan until about 1200 BC, 100 years before this time
 - They lived principally in five city-states along the sea plain
 - Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gaza, Gath, Ekron
 - You may remember that the Lord directed Israel away from the Philistines when He directed them into the land after the Exodus
 - They were a strong warring people
 - Samson spent much of his time as judge in war with the Philistines
 - They were eventually defeated by Hezekiah
- But at this point, they are a very strong people, and the Lord is giving them a measure of success against the people of Israel
 - Their success is in keeping with the recurring pattern throughout the period of the judges

- Israel sins against the Lord in practicing idolatry
- The Lord responds by punishing Israel at the hands of their enemies
- Then when the people have come to repent and call upon the name of the Lord, He relents by raising up a judge to free the people
- Ultimately, that judge restores peace for a time
- But from judge to judge, the cycle deteriorates
 - The people become increasingly pagan
 - The judges become increasingly ungodly even as they serve the Lord's purposes
 - And after each reinstatement, Israel's ungodliness is more ungodly than the last
 - It's a downward spiral
- Now during Samson, the Lord is chastising the people under the Philistines
 - At the end of v.1, the Israelite army meets the Philistines in battle near Aphek
 - This town is located in the eastern edge of the Jezreel valley just north of Carmel
 - It defined the northern border between the two nations
 - And this battle was a disaster for Israel
 - In v.2 we're told that the Philistines defeated Israel killing 4,000 men
 - The people of Israel limp back to Shiloh with their tails between their legs
 - And then begins the review process
 - Notice Israel asks the right question
 - Why did the Lord let Israel lose?
 - They recognize that their fortunes turn on the Lord's providence

- If they lose, it means the Lord has withheld His blessing from the battle
- This was the right question for them to ask and it's the right question we need to ask in our lives
 - There is no moment of our life that isn't under the Lord's providence
 - When trials and disappointments come our way, we need to conduct a similar kind of soul searching
 - Why is the Lord allowing this to happen?
 - And more specifically, what are we to gain or learn from this trial?
 - Since we know the Lord is about accomplishing good in our lives
- Israel asks the right question, but they don't arrive at the right answer
 - They assume that they haven't been harnessing the power of God properly
 - They propose taking the Ark of the Covenant out of the Holy of Holies and carrying it with them into the battle
 - They use the Ark like a pagan idol
 - This is a perfect picture of how unbelieving people relate to the power of God
 - It's mystical, magical, and something we can manipulate
 - The correct answer to the question was, God is disciplining us for our sin and we must repent to restore fellowship with Him
 - And when we repent, the Lord will restore us in fellowship according to His mercy and His faithfulness to His covenant
 - In other words, the correct answer recognized they needed a God-centered solution for a man-centered problem
 - Instead, they assumed they had a God-centered problem they could solve with a man-centered response
 - God was too far away from the battle
 - In reality, it was Israel that was far from God

- The real irony of their situation is that they came to Shiloh to get God, but they completely missed Him
 - Samuel tells us that God was speaking to Israel from Shiloh through the prophet
 - If the people wanted to know why the Lord let them lose the battle, they only needed to hear the word of the Lord
 - They travel back to Shiloh, they ask the right question, but they don't seek the answer in the right place
 - They chose the symbols of God over the word of God
 - And of course, we need not look very hard in our own culture to see this same mistake repeated countless times, both inside the church and out
 - Certainly, many false religions, including those claiming to be Christian, have set the word of God aside
 - And in its place these groups have substituted their own views of God
 - In particular, they approach God like a genie, living in a lamp
 - If only they come close to the objects of their faith, saying the right words, making the right gestures, then they will appease God
 - They repeat the mistake of these Israelites
 - Even Christians can fall into this wrong thinking, becoming victims of thinking that moves to a man-centered view of our relationship with God
 - Our walk with Christ becomes more superstition than Spirit-led
 - We carry crosses, we pause for a moment before a painting of "Jesus" on the church wall
 - We display ornate, unread Bibles on cloth-covered tables
 - We recite obscure prayers hidden deep in the Old Testament assuming they contain special power
 - We bake "Ezekiel bread" or keep certain Jewish feasts

- We speak in certain ways, sing certain hymns, and only the King James Version, please...
 - In every case, we're reducing God to something we can control and manipulate to our own desires
 - Icons replace insight and relics replace relationship
 - So we can bend God's will to our needs, or so we think
 - When instead we should be bending our will to meet God's standards for holiness and obedience
 - And those standards are made clear to us in His word
- That's the contrast Samuel is emphasizing here...the Lord is ready to speak and lead His people through His anointed prophet, but they aren't listening
 - And who is leading the people into the tabernacle to claim the Ark?
 - None other than Eli's corrupt sons
 - They move the Ark from its place and the people are thrilled to have it working for them, or so they think

1Sam. 4:5 As the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth resounded.

1Sam. 4:6 When the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, "What does the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" Then they understood that the ark of the LORD had come into the camp.

1Sam. 4:7 The Philistines were afraid, for they said, "God has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before.

1Sam. 4:8 "Woe to us! Who shall deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who smote the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness.

1Sam. 4:9 "Take courage and be men, O Philistines, or you will become slaves to the Hebrews, as they have been slaves to you; therefore, be men and fight."

- Notice how the Philistines responded?
 - They hear the shouting of the people and make inquiries to know what the yelling was about
 - Somehow, probably by spies, they learn that the people had retrieved the very same Ark that Israel had carried from Egypt
 - It's been nearly 400 years since the people entered the land, but still the Philistines remember what the Lord did in freeing Israel

- They declare woe to us because they have never experienced dread like this before
- If the Lord of Israel could wipe out powerful Egypt then certainly the Philistine army stood no hope of winning, right?
- Isn't it interesting that the Philistines react with reverence and awe in remembering the great things God has done for Israel in the past
 - They are the pagans in this story
 - They are the ones who should be overlooking the power of God in His true form and relying on idols
 - And yet it's the pagans who respect the power of the Living God
 - While the people of God have casually invaded the Holy of Holies and violated God's law by removing the Ark against God's instructions
 - It's God's people that are treating Yahweh as a relic, while the pagans display fear of the Lord
- Samuel's narration is intended by the author to draw our attention back to the Jews' victory at Jericho
 - In that battle, Israel followed the Lord's orders to carry the Ark around the city seven times
 - And the people were to shout to raze the walls of the city
 - So here again the people carry the Ark and the people shout
 - They are repeating the instructions of the Lord, except these instructions weren't given to them
- This is a classic mistake of God's people, and it's repeated down to this very day
 - We take words the Lord gave to another people in another time and we appropriate them for ourselves
 - We like what God said in the past
 - We view it as a recipe, something we can reuse like watching a rerun on TV
 - And we assume if we do what God told someone else to do, we will get the same results that someone else got

- In this case, the people assume that if carrying the Ark and shouting defeated Jericho, then it will work against the Philistines
- Once again, this thinking requires taking the living word of the Living God and turning it into ritual and superstition
 - God speaks to people with specific intent for specific reasons
 - And unless He states that His words are true for all men and all time, then we are not free to assume as much
 - For example, I've been asked if God is obligated to save an entire household after one member of the family comes to Christ
 - When I've asked why someone thinks this will happen, they point to the story of Cornelius in Acts 10-11
 - In that story we're told how Peter heard that the Lord intended to save Cornelius and all his household
- Obviously, this is an example of the same kind of misuse of scripture
 - The fact that the Lord intended to save all Cornelius' family doesn't become a prescription for how the Lord will move in every family
 - Similarly the fact that the Lord chose to defeat Jericho with His Ark and the people shouting, doesn't make that method a prescription for defeating armies
 - To see the Israelites misusing the Lord's instructions in this way proves they are far from Him and are not accustomed to His word
- In v.9 the Philistines try to shore up the courage of the troops saying they must be tough or else become slaves of Israel
 - Here we see the limits of their faith in Yahweh
 - They acknowledge His power but they still assume that a courageous and determined army can beat Israel and their God
 - So clearly the Philistines are not bowing their knees to the Living God
 - And in that regard, they are no different from Israel itself

- Of course God wasn't about to reward the Israelites' sin in removing the Ark with a victory in the battle

1Sam. 4:10 So the Philistines fought and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent; and the slaughter was very great, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers.

1Sam. 4:11 And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

- Once again, the Philistines defeat the Israelite army
 - We don't know where this battle took place exactly, but it appears to have taken place within a short walk from Shiloh (see v.12)
 - Not a man in Israel could stand in the battle that day
 - Everyone ran and when you're running, you can't defend yourself
 - Exactly 30,000 Jewish men died in battle that day
 - The number 3 stands out to remind us Who permitted this slaughter
 - In fact, the magnitude of this loss was far greater than the previous loss
 - Which in itself proved that the Lord was not with the people
 - Also dying in this battle were both sons of Eli
 - They must have accompanied the Ark into the battle and then been caught up in the resulting melee
 - In fact, we can assume they were the priests who entered the Holy of Holies to retrieve the Ark in the first place
 - Their death is fulfillment of the Lord's promise to Eli that both his sons would die on the same day
 - And God even orchestrated the circumstances of their death so that no one would have reason to debate the justification for God's actions
 - Not that He needed any additional justification for taking their lives
 - I'm sure few tears were shed in Israel for their passing
- More importantly, the Lord allowed the Philistines to capture the Ark
 - Clearly, the Lord is permitting the Ark to leave Israel for a good reason

- The Philistines couldn't have captured the Ark unless the Lord permitted
- And it soon becomes apparent what the Lord is at work to accomplish
 - Beginning with some unfinished business with Eli

1Sam. 4:12 Now a man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day with his clothes torn and dust on his head.

1Sam. 4:13 When he came, behold, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road eagerly watching, because his heart was trembling for the ark of God. So the man came to tell it in the city, and all the city cried out.

1Sam. 4:14 When Eli heard the noise of the outcry, he said, "What does the noise of this commotion mean?" Then the man came hurriedly and told Eli.

1Sam. 4:15 Now Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes were set so that he could not see.

1Sam. 4:16 The man said to Eli, "I am the one who came from the battle line. Indeed, I escaped from the battle line today." And he said, "How did things go, my son?"

1Sam. 4:17 Then the one who brought the news replied, "Israel has fled before the Philistines and there has also been a great slaughter among the people, and your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been taken."

1Sam. 4:18 When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell off the seat backward beside the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for he was old and heavy. Thus he judged Israel forty years.

1Sam. 4:19 Now his daughter-in-law, Phinehas's wife, was pregnant and about to give birth; and when she heard the news that the ark of God was taken and that her father-in-law and her husband had died, she knelt down and gave birth, for her pains came upon her.

1Sam. 4:20 And about the time of her death the women who stood by her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have given birth to a son." But she did not answer or pay attention.

1Sam. 4:21 And she called the boy Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel," because the ark of God was taken and because of her father-in-law and her husband.

1Sam. 4:22 She said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God was taken."

- A Benjamite survives the battle to return and report the result to High Priest, Eli
 - He is clearly disheveled and looks like a defeated soldier
 - He finds Eli on the road waiting to hear the news
 - Eli has heard the battle commotion and is wondering how Israel fared
 - Notice he's particularly worried about the Ark

- Like a father who lends his prized sports car to his newly licensed teenage son
- He's more worried about the car than he is about his son
- When the soldier comes, he explains what's happened
 - He explains he came from the battle lines
 - And in short, Israel has lost a great battle
 - In fact Eli's two sons are both dead
- Finally, the soldier says the Philistines have captured the Ark of the Lord
 - At the news of the Ark, Eli falls backward beside the gate
 - The gate refers to the multi-chambered entrance to a walled city
 - To sit by the gate probably meant Eli was seated on the top of the wall of the city at the gate, where people could get a good look at the battle in the distance
- When Eli hears the news of the Ark's capture, he appears to pass out in shock
 - And as he falls backward, he lands on the ground and breaks his neck and dies
 - Interestingly, Samuel says Eli was old and "heavy"
 - Heavy would mean the man was overweight, which seems to be a commentary by Samuel on Eli's self-indulgence
 - Which is something we've seen in his raising of his sons
 - But there is an interesting word play in Hebrew at work here too
 - The Hebrew word for heavy is *kaved*
 - Later in v.21 we're told that the glory of the Lord has departed from the tabernacle, as indeed it has with the departing of the Ark
 - The Hebrew word for glory is *kavod*
 - So the juxtapositioning of these two very similar words in the narrative make a commentary on Eli's reign as High Priest
 - Eli made himself *kaved* rather than giving the Lord *kavod*

- In a sense Eli took the glory for himself rather than using his position to give the Lord glory
- And so on the same day Eli lost everything, Israel lost the glory of the Lord
- Here's one more time for us to remember that the priority in any ministry is to glorify the Lord, not to enrich ourselves or impress others
 - And these goals are mutually exclusive
 - When we seek to serve ourselves, we necessarily stop serving God
 - He stops benefitting from our service and we stop receiving His pleasure
 - We need to apply this standard to those who serve us as well
 - If a man or woman is intent on serving themselves instead of serving God, it will be apparent
 - And when we detect this turn, we need to use discernment and look elsewhere for spiritual counsel
 - Notice that Eli reacted to the news of the Ark, not to the news of his sons
 - It would seem to confirm for us that Eli was not particularly attached to his sons
 - Perhaps later in life he had come to realize the kind of sons he had raised
 - Perhaps he had regrets that they were a source of dishonor to the Lord
 - Nevertheless, it was too late for Eli and his family
- The final episode in the family story is Eli's daughter-in-law, Phinehas' wife
 - Notice she is never named in this short account
 - That in itself tells us that she is not important to the story except in her words
 - She was pregnant during this time

- And as she hears the disturbing news of her husband and father-in-law's death, she gives birth prematurely
- Josephus reported that she gave birth at seven months
- And in giving birth, we're told in v.20 that the mother dies
- Before she dies she names her son Ichabod, which means literally "no glory" in Hebrew, reflecting the departure of the glory from the tabernacle
 - The glory of the Lord has indeed departed
 - And it will not return until Solomon builds the temple and returns the Ark to the Holy of Holies
- Though this girl speaks correctly, in a sense she is also repeating the error of all Israel
 - She has associated the presence of the Lord in Israel with a physical object
 - She is saying that the Lord is absent Israel because an artifact has been removed
 - Like those who believe the Lord only lives inside Church buildings
 - So this girl is lamenting the departure of God and feeling far from God
 - But it's been said that if you feel far from God, it's not the Lord Who has moved
 - The Lord is still with Israel
 - But Israel has departed from the Lord
 - And they are suffering the trials of a people who have become so distant from the Lord that they treat Him as a relic
- In stark contrast with the pagan approach of the apostate Israelites, the Philistines are about to have a very personal encounter with the living God

1Sam. 5:1 Now the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod.
1Sam. 5:2 Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it to the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon.

[1Sam. 5:3](#) When the Ashdodites arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and set him in his place again.

[1Sam. 5:4](#) But when they arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. And the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off on the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him.

[1Sam. 5:5](#) Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor all who enter Dagon's house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

[1Sam. 5:6](#) Now the hand of the LORD was heavy on the Ashdodites, and He ravaged them and smote them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territories.

[1Sam. 5:7](#) When the men of Ashdod saw that it was so, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is severe on us and on Dagon our god."

[1Sam. 5:8](#) So they sent and gathered all the lords of the Philistines to them and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?" And they said, "Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath." And they brought the ark of the God of Israel around.

[1Sam. 5:9](#) After they had brought it around, the hand of the LORD was against the city with very great confusion; and He smote the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them.

[1Sam. 5:10](#) So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. And as the ark of God came to Ekron the Ekronites cried out, saying, "They have brought the ark of the God of Israel around to us, to kill us and our people."

[1Sam. 5:11](#) They sent therefore and gathered all the lords of the Philistines and said, "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, so that it will not kill us and our people." For there was a deadly confusion throughout the city; the hand of God was very heavy there.

[1Sam. 5:12](#) And the men who did not die were smitten with tumors and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

- This chapter doesn't require much explanation, though there is probably a lot we could say about it
 - In summary, the Ark goes on a tour of the Philistine cities
 - It moves from near Shiloh directly west past Aphek to the sea
 - Then it moves down the Via Mars to Ashdod
 - The Ashdodites decided this war booty should be placed in the temple dedicated to their god Dagon
 - Dagon was the fertility god of the Philistines
 - He is pictured as part man, part fish

- In fact, the word *dag* in Hebrew means fishy part
- He was the god of grain and was responsible for giving bountiful harvest
- Like most false gods, he originated among people in Mesopotamia – the home ground of Satan
- When the Ark is placed in Dagon's temple, the Lord knocks the Dagon idol over during the night
 - The idol is placed on its face, which is a position of worship
 - These idols were typically quite large, standing tens of feet high
 - So it was no small matter to find this idol on the ground
- The Philistines are shocked to find their so-called god worshipping the God of Israel, so they place it back in position
 - The next night the Lord repeats the process
 - Only the second time, the Lord removes the head and hands of the statue
 - This symbolizes the removal of the authority and power of this idol
 - From this point forward the priest of this false god wouldn't dare enter into the temple of this idol, leaving it empty
- At this point, we begin to see the Lord acting again in the narrative
 - Up to this point, the Lord has been understood to be working behind the scenes
 - He's withholding His blessing in Israel
 - And He removed His glory from the tabernacle
 - But He's not seen as actively working until now
 - At this point, He begins to take His anger out on the Philistines
 - In Ashdod the Lord brings a plague of tumors against the people in the city
 - The Hebrew word for tumors comes from a root word that means "to swell"

- This could be almost any kind of swelling
 - But the in v.9 the Hebrew word for “broke out” refers to the groin area specifically
 - So it’s likely the Lord is sending a plague of hemorrhoids upon the people
 - This is a serious problem
- Somehow the leaders of the city determine that this curse is the result of the Hebrew God
 - So they quickly determine the Ark needs to go
 - Rather than send it back to Israel, the caring Philistines decide to send it on to their fellow Philistines
 - They determine to send it to Gath, the southernmost Philistine city
 - Very quickly, the citizens of Gath likewise find it difficult to sit down
 - So then the Ark is off again to Ekron
 - And the news of the Ark precedes it, so that even as the Ark is being delivered to Ekron, the people are lamenting
 - They declare that it has come to kill them
 - These must be some case of hemorrhoids if they fear death!
 - In fact, we’re told there was a “deadly confusion” throughout Ekron
 - The suggestion is a great panic that led to people dying at each other’s hand
 - The city is dissolving into chaos and anarchy as a result of the Ark’s arrival
 - Those in the city who weren’t killed receive the tumors and all suffer
- Once again, Samuel is a master of contrast in his narrative
 - In Chapter 4, the nation of Israel tried to use the Ark to access the power of God for their own purposes
 - And God didn’t play along

- Israel couldn't repackage God to fit their desires
- So the Lord hides Himself from His own people leaving them to stumble
- They are a culture of evil and sinful desires living like pagans
- In Chapter 5, the Philistines, a pagan people, treat the Ark with reverence and awe
 - They try to incorporate it into their pantheon of gods
 - But the Lord of Israel will not be controlled by pagans either
- Now He shows Himself by bringing judgment to the pagans in a particularly degrading way
 - His will is controlling the circumstances
 - If the people want to access the power of God through a relic, the Lord is content to demonstrate His power through that instrument
 - But He won't perform as they expect
 - The Jews expected victory and received defeat
 - The Philistines expected to be blessed by possession of the Ark
 - And instead they were cursed
- No man can own or manipulate God
 - His will be done
 - Not ours