

I Samuel

Lesson 8 - Chapter 4 and 5

Last week in 1st Samuel chapter 3 we witnessed the chosen moment that the Lord moved upon young Samuel and commenced his preparation as a Prophet for God. As Samuel matured and began prophesying soon all Israel from north to south, all 12 tribes, became aware of Samuel's accuracy and enlightenment and so he gained a reputation as being God's prophet for all Israel. This was a new phenomenon; not since the time of Moses had one man been recognized as a central authority for the Word of God. Rather during the era of Judges (that is coming to a close with the books of Samuel) a prophet was usually only for a single tribe and there was no central national authority except for the Priesthood.

Let's read 1st Samuel chapter 4 from beginning to end.

READ 1ST SAMUEL 4: 1 – end

Let me sum up what we just read here before we get into the details. First, we witnessed the Philistines capture the Ark of the Covenant from Israel. Second is that we see the end of Eli and his two sons running the priesthood at Shiloh. And the bottom line is that the two events are intertwined and related and indicate the same thing: God has pulled His glory away from Israel and has pulled His authority from the dysfunctional Levite priesthood that had been presiding over Israel for quite some time. Put another way: the Lord has drawn away from both the 12 secular tribes and the single Priestly tribe that together represent every element of Israel.

The story begins with this statement that connects chapter 4 back to chapter 3, that the word of Samuel came to all Israel. A transition is underway; just as Yehoveh raised up Joshua well before Moses died so that Joshua would become familiar and trusted and prepared for what was coming once Moses was gone, so is Samuel being introduced to the people thus giving the people time to learn to trust Samuel and for Samuel to gain spiritual maturity and experience for what lay ahead.

But in the same verse we are also told that Israel went out to fight the Philistines. Now it is all but universally taught that it must be that Israel had been prompted to go to battle against the Philistines at Samuel's urging; that Samuel prophesied to Israel that the tribes of Israel should once again take up the Holy War for Canaan and oust the dreaded Philistines from the Promised Land. However not only is that not actually implied, it also doesn't fit the theme, purpose, or context of this story of Israel losing its precious Ark of the Covenant to their arch enemy. This decidedly was NOT Samuel's doing that Israel went to fight the Philistines.

Although the general area of the battle is known no one is certain about the exact modern day

location of **Even-Ezer**, however there is fairly substantial evidence for the location of **Afek**. These 2 places were about 20 miles west of **Shiloh** in the coastal plains (called the **Shefelah**); it was the lowlands region that lay at the foot of the hill country of Ephraim and Judah. What is important to understand from a geo-political point of view is that this area was inside Israeli territory; it was NOT part of Philistia. So the fact that the Philistines had a substantial military presence there makes it clear that they also had gained much control over the southern and central tribal lands of Israel and had full intent to lord over, if not outright conquer and assimilate, the people there.

As a reminder, the Philistines were a seafaring people who originated from the area of the Aegean Sea. They were well known in Egypt and caused them much trouble and their designation as the “Sea Peoples” was written into Egyptian records at the temple of Ramses III in Thebes (modern day Luxor) around 1200 B.C. They settled all up and down the Mediterranean Coast from Egypt to Canaan and represented a very serious threat to all the indigenous tribes and nations of the coastal regions. It is obvious from their location in Israeli territory that they intended to expand their power east and north, although they were never very successful at it.

The Philistines were a nation of warriors as opposed to Israel that was a nation of farmers and herdsmen. Sometimes what I just said is taken to mean that the Philistines were warlike in character and the Israelites were peace loving; but that isn't the point. It's that the Philistines (like many other nations in that time) had a fully formed government and so also had a standing army; they had a paid, uniformed military that employed fulltime professional soldiers armed and funded by the leadership just as most nations do in our time. Israel on the other hand did not have a national government and so did not have a national army. They did when they first entered Canaan over 300 years earlier (under Joshua's leadership), but it disbanded in only a few years after the initial victories were won and sufficient control over much of Canaan was achieved such that the 12 tribes of Israel moved in and settled. Now Israel was but a militia of civilians that armed themselves and came together as needed and when called. So it was Israel's militia of civilians who went against Philistia's well-trained, experienced and professional soldiers in a battlefield between Even-ezer and Afek. And the result was that Israel was routed and lost 4000 men.

After a day of fighting and defeat the **zikne yisrael** (the old men, or elders, of Israel) gathered together and wondered why Yehoveh defeated Israel on the battlefield. These **zikne yisrael** were not military leaders but rather the people's representatives of the various tribes who were entrusted with important decisions for the community at large. And it was these elders who decided it would be a good idea to go and get the Ark of the Covenant from its resting place at Shiloh and bring it to the battleground.

It is quite interesting that the mindset of the elders was that Yehoveh Himself defeated Israel, not so much the Philistines. It was neither chance nor the Philistines' might, but rather that the Lord was displeased for some reason and was thus directly responsible for Israel's great loss that day. Apparently they had not sought the Lord's council before going to battle, and so now (after the fact) they thought it good to consult and involve Him. Wow. Does that ever sound familiar, huh? How often we strike out on our own, certain our ideas are well conceived,

rational and MUST be in harmony with God's will, only to run into a block wall; and only afterward do we then take the time to commune with the Father and seek His guidance and decision and actually follow it.

So they sent for the Ark and it was delivered to the battlefield, along with the priests Hophni and Pinchas. Under normal circumstances Eli would have accompanied the Ark, but he was aged, feeble and blind so his sons went in his stead. Naturally, as it says in verse 6, when the Ark arrived there was a tumultuous shout as the Israelite fighters were overjoyed for its presence with them, as they were certain this now meant victory. Actually what the passage says in Hebrew is that the Israelites gave a **teruah** when they saw the Ark. **Teruah** is a certain kind of blast that comes from a Shofar. So we can envision the blowing of scores of shofars accompanying the cheers of the men in celebration at the sight of the Ark of God.

But what was it that they expected from the arrival of the Ark to the battlefield? The concept was that the presence of the Ark assumed the presence of YHWH. In fact the Ark (to their minds) was a visible sign of His presence. I have taught on numerous occasions that what the Israelites pictured in their minds about how Yehoveh operated was much like the other societies of that age also pictured how their gods behaved. It was usual for a nation to bring some of their gods to the battle location and turn the whole bloody affair into a battle of the gods as much as a battle of soldiers. Thus the victor would assume that their gods were greater than the gods of the losers.

The Israelites felt that the presence of the Ark of the Covenant would without doubt grant them victory; and at first blush the Philistines felt the same way. Because when they heard the shouts of the Hebrews and the din of their Shofars rising into the heavens the Philistines grew worried. They knew that the cries of joy from the Israelites could mean but one thing: the God of Israel had shown up!

Now as we read of the recorded thoughts of the Philistine soldiers we notice something interesting; they kept referring to the "gods" (plural) of Israel. The same gods who had wrecked Egypt on behalf of these Hebrews. Here's a little tip for those who like to study a bit of Hebrew when looking at these Old Testament passages. The word that is being translated as "gods" is **elohim**. Now most of the time this is NOT translated as plural, but singular WHEN it is referring to the God of Israel. So how do we know to translate this as "gods" and not "god" (one god) in this case? Context. When a common foreigner is speaking about the Hebrew deity and the term **elohim** is used, it is to be thought of in the common way of speaking among pagans and therefore indicates "multiple gods". On the other hand when a Hebrew is speaking about the God of the Hebrews and utters the word "**elohim**", then it is in the grammatical form called the plural of majesty and it simply means "God".

As I was reading this passage a question jumped to the forefront of my mind: why would the Philistines refer to the Israelite's deity as "gods"? Why would the Philistines assume that Israel had more than one god? The obvious answer is that they thought everybody had multiple gods and so naturally Israel also had a number of gods they could call upon. But the Philistines had been rubbing shoulders with the Hebrews for decades, probably at least a century, by the time of Samuel. Why, after all this contact between Israel and the Philistines,

wasn't it common knowledge for the Philistines that (unlike any other existing society or nation) Israel only acknowledged ONE God, even if the Philistines didn't know the particulars or found such a thing to be rather laughable? They were certainly aware of what happened down in Egypt. And there had been intermarriage between Philistines and Hebrews even though Israel's leadership discouraged it, so there was ample opportunity for the Philistines to hear about YHWH.

The sad answer is that Israel was so dysfunctional and casual in their worship of Yehoveh that it made no impression on their neighbors. Instead of Israel influencing the Canaanites and the Philistines, Israel began to look a lot like the Canaanites and the Philistines. Instead of the Philistines fully understanding that the Israelites recognized but one unique and all-powerful God, they saw nothing special or terribly different about how Israel went about their religion; they looked pretty much like everybody else. We have been constantly reading in the Torah and now the books following it of the people of Israel erecting shrines to various gods and goddesses, building Asheroth on high places, and adopting pagan worship practices and mixing it all with the worship of Yehoveh. Idolatry was running rampant not just throughout the common folk of the 12 tribes but also their leadership and even the Levite Priesthood. And even if the Levite Priesthood wasn't necessarily directly worshipping other known deities, they were abandoning God's laws and commands in favor of rituals and practices that they invented and preferred (and most of these were borrowed from their Canaanite neighbors).

Here's another of those Old Testament happenings where we modern Believers tend to be a little arrogant and shake our heads in disgust at these awful Hebrews, while being utterly blind to the similarity between that and many of our own practices within the modern Church. Naturally I'm generalizing and in no way am I issuing some all-encompassing indictment. But as you surf the Internet or drive down the streets of our communities we'll find Gay churches, churches that do not acknowledge the deity of Christ, churches that scoff at a virgin birth or even the possibility of resurrection, churches that preach that the be-all end-all of our existence is for God to make us wealthy, and denominations who say that any kind of faith in any kind of god is a good, respectable, and valid faith. If a non-Believer didn't see us pull up into the parking lot of a church building often times they'd have no idea we were any different than they are; and that's because they have influenced us far more than we have influenced them. We sure don't read of any Philistines worshipping Yehoveh, or converting to become Hebrews, or even knowing much about the Hebrew religion. But we see plenty of Hebrews adopting the Philistine religious system, marrying into the Philistines, and at the least being quite familiar and intrigued with the Philistine gods. Not much new under the sun, is there?

But the Philistines were not ones to let fear overtake them, so they encouraged one to fight like men even if the gods of the Hebrews seemed invincible, and result was a slaughter even worse than the first; 30,000 Israelite men died on the battlefield. Verse 10 (speaking of the Hebrews) says "every man fled to his tent". That phrase is repeated a number of times in Scripture because it was a somewhat common saying. The idea was that not only did the fighters retreat, run for their lives, and return home, but also that they laid down their weapons and gave up being soldiers. "Every man fled to his tent" is the epitome of complete demoralizing defeat whereby the soldier actually quits the military. But verse 11 tells us the real focal point of this chapter: ***"Moreover, the Ark of God was captured and the two sons of***

Eli, Hophni and Pinchas, died". The death of Hophni and Pinchas on the same day was the sign that the Lord, through his unnamed prophet, had told Eli to watch for. It was the unmistakable sign that the demise of the house and priestly line of Eli that was to be expected at some unknown time had arrived.

But at the same moment the irreplaceable Ark of God was also captured and together with the deaths of the two high-ranking priests who had accompanied the Ark to the battle sight, it became de facto proof to all of those present that Yehoveh had finally had enough of this degenerate people and unfaithful priesthood. God had withdrawn from Israel, lock, stock and barrel. The leadership of Israel were so apostate that they actually thought they could COMPEL God to fight a fight that THEY wanted fought; a fight in the manner, place and time of their choosing, simply because they transported that gold overlaid wooden chest to their camp. Many a wonderful theologian has noticed this attitude and commented on this particular passage of Scripture, but few as wonderfully and eloquently put as from an anonymous contributor to the Berleburger Bible (a German translation) from the early 1700's:

"It is just the same now, when we take MERELY a historical Christ outside of us for our Redeemer. He must prove His help chiefly internally by His Holy Spirit, to redeem us out of the hand of the Philistines; though externally he must not be thrown into the shade, as accomplishing our justification. If we had not Christ, we could never stand. For there is no help in heaven and on earth besides Him. But if we have Him in no other way than merely without (outside) of us and under us, if we only preach about Him, teach, hear, read, talk, discuss, and dispute about Him, take His name into our mouth, but will NOT let Him work and show His power in us, He will be of no more help to us than the Ark helped the Israelites".

You see, Torah Class: if one takes the Holy Spirit out of the Messiah, then he is no more than a mere human. If one takes the Holy Spirit out of the Ark of the Covenant, then it is no more than a fancy and expensive box. A cross is not Christ, and the Ark is not God, and until God's people can apprehend this then we shall be without the power He seeks to lend us to do His will on earth.

Verse 12 explains that a soldier who escaped the slaughter ran to Shiloh to tell the High Priest what has happened. It is now obvious that it was from Shiloh that the order came to proceed in battle against the Philistines in the first place. Breathless, after fleeing for 20 miles, the man arrives at the site of the Sanctuary with his garment intentionally rent and dirt thrown over his head in a customary sign of calamity and death. As the people of Shiloh (presumably Levites) saw him coming their hearts sank along with their stomachs and as he gave them the terrible news they wailed in anguish and fear. Eli was sitting in a chair outside the entrance into the Tabernacle area; he was blind but not deaf and he heard the ruckus and shrieks of horror and began to tremble knowing that his worst fears were realized.

The 98-year-old Eli was told of the slaughter of thousands of Israelites, and the death of his two sons; but it was not until the man told him of the capture of the Ark of God by the Philistines that Eli fell over backwards from his chair and broke his neck and died. Eli had judged Israel for 40 years.

But the reaction doesn't end there; when Pinchas's wife heard that her husband was killed at Even-ezer, her father-in-law had just collapsed and died, and the Ark of God was no longer in Israelite hands, she immediately went into labor and gave birth. But the labor was abnormal and as she lay dying the women who were attending her informed her that she shouldn't die in anxiety. The child she bore was alive and well and a cherished son. Her last words were the naming of the child she'd never get to nurse, or hold, or see grow into manhood. And as was customary of that era, a child was often named for some momentous happening on the day of his birth. Unfortunately for this child and mother, that momentous happening couldn't have been more negative and so the child would wear that terrible day like a mourning garment all of his life, because she named him ***Ichavod***. ***Ichavod*** literally means, "Where is the Glory?" The Glory, or ***kavod*** in Hebrew, is referring to Yehoveh. It was His Glory that would appear above the winged Cherubim of the Ark. It was His Glory in the Tent Sanctuary that gave that place its value and meaning and holiness. With the loss of the Ark, the resting place for the Glory, the Glory was gone.

I think we can skip over this event too fast and not realize the enormity of what losing the presence of the Ark meant to the people of Israel; and why Eli and his daughter-in-law both died virtually from the overwhelming shock of learning of it. For the people of Israel it meant that God was gone. And if God was gone, then the guarantor of the Covenants was gone. And if the guarantor of the Covenants was gone then the Covenants were no longer valid. And if the Covenants were no longer valid then all rights to their land inheritance of Canaan ceased. Calamity is simply not a big enough word; the closest thing I can use as a parallel is to be thrown into the Lake of Fire. In fact, in Jewish history, this event of the loss of the Ark of God to the Philistines is thought of as on par with the destruction of Jerusalem and exile into Babylon. Every element of Hebrew society was either affected or abolished.

But let's also notice what I alluded to at the start: God has taken drastic action to change the course of redemptive history in Israel. All in the same day the people of Israel were punished for centuries of ever-increasing lawlessness and apostasy by losing 30,000 of their men in battle. The Priesthood was emptied out and those in charge, from the High Priest to the next two most senior priests (Hophni and Pinchas) were also dead. The power behind the priesthood (the Glory of God) and the Ark (the sign of God's Glory) were entirely removed from Israel's possession. The Tabernacle no longer had purpose or meaning because the one who used to dwell there and gave it purpose and meaning has abandoned it. And the PLACE of the empty Tabernacle (Shiloh) was now just another cult site, not much different than any other religious site as used by pagans. Thus Shiloh ceased to have any religious meaning for the Hebrews.

Let's continue this story in chapter 5.

READ 1ST SAMUEL CHAPTER 5 all

The Philistines logically transported the Ark of God to the place of their chief deity, the Temple of Dagon in Ashdod. The modern city of Ashdod is near this ancient place but it is not built upon the old city's ruins.

Scholars speak of a pentapolis when it comes to the arrangement of Philistia; that is, there were 5 major Philistine cities each lorded over by a Philistine king. The cities were Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gat, Ekron, and Gaza.

It certainly appeared to the Philistines and Israelites alike that a sudden geo-political power shift had just occurred as a result of the battle of ***Even-ezer***. The evidence of it was that the Philistines had captured the Ark of the God of Israel, and therefore the Israelite God, and therefore the Israelites were now under the control of Philistia in every sense. They did what most any Middle Eastern society would have done; they brought the Ark of the Covenant as a gift for their own victorious god. Placing the Ark before the statue of Dagon was symbolic of dominance; the Ark would be Dagon's footstool.

However what neither Israel nor Philistia counted on was that Yehoveh is the God over history. Not just Israel's history but all history. Yehoveh has no territorial boundaries and He has no peer, as the Philistines were about to discover. The Philistines placed the Ark in front of Dagon in a position of submission, but when the priests of Dagon entered the temple the next day, it was the idol of Dagon that was lying prostrate before the Ark. Figuring this was merely some kind of strange coincidence they propped the idol back upright only to return and find that this time it was not only face down before the Ark of God but also the head and hands had broken off the body as it fell across the temple threshold.

Then we're informed as a side note that this was the reason that (at the time of the writing of this section of 1st Samuel) the Philistine priests had developed this strange custom of stepping (or even perhaps jumping) over the doorway's threshold into the temple. Understand: the threshold into the temple of a god was the place where the common ended and the holy began. When a worshipper stepped over the threshold upon entering a god's temple, one sphere of reality was left for another. The world of men was outside, while the world of the gods was inside. This was serious business.

But humiliating the Dagon idol was just the beginning. What we are about to see is a series of plagues upon the chief cities of the Philistines wrought by Yehoveh and these plagues are eerily reminiscent of what happened in Egypt. What we also see is that it was the Lord God of Israel who first used a tactic that would later be made infamous by the Greeks at a place called Troy. Yehoveh employed the Ark as a sort of Trojan Horse. The Philistines thought they had defeated Israel and humiliated the God of Israel, and so cheerfully brought the Ark inside their territory and even into the temple of Dagon; but the God of Israel merely used their arrogance as a means to wreak havoc upon them.

The people of Ashdod suddenly broke out in tumors and quickly came to the conclusion that it was the Ark of God that was the source of the problem. They called a meeting of the Philistine leaders where they decided that the best course of action was to take it elsewhere. But they weren't about to send it back to Israel so they transported it to another city of their pentapolis, Gat. No sooner had the Ark arrived than a panic set in at Gat because the people there broke out in tumors as well.

What were these "tumors"? Well, if you compare various bible translations you'll find various

solutions. In Hebrew the word is ***ophalim***, which can be translated as “swellings”. ***Ophalim*** is from the root ***ophel*** that can mean mound or hill. In fact, in the Old City of Jerusalem, the City of David was built up a steep hillside starting from the bottom of a deep ravine. At the highest point of the hill was Mt. Moriah and there the Temple was built. The area in between the City of David and the Temple Mount was called the ***Ophel***, the mound.

So these were some kind of swellings or mounds on the body. However over time the use of the word began to change, and in time it referred to a part of the body that was considered a kind of swollen mound: the buttocks. They didn't want to use the formal word for the buttocks (they found it a bit crude) so instead they began to refer to it as a person's ***ophel***. From this inference some scholars have decided that the swelling, the tumor, was essentially a painful swelling of a swelling: hemorrhoids. And you'll perhaps find that exact translation in your own bible. I don't think it's correct, but it is kind of comical.

The people of Gat then sent the Ark on to the unsuspecting folks at Ekron, but when the citizens of Ekron saw it coming they went ballistic and told their Philistine leaders that they certainly didn't want to house it there and suffer the oppression of tumors that the other Philistine city dwellers had endured. The Philistines were running out of places to send it and so the game of hot potato had to come to an end. The Philistines relented and decided it was better to return the Ark to Israel than to tempt the God of Israel any further.

We'll begin chapter 6 next week and watch the Philistines gladly send the Ark back to its original owners.