



Study #3: Shattered Religion

1 Samuel 4:1-7:17
Week of 10/4

Victory at Ebenezer (1 Samuel 4–7)

This section of Scripture starts and ends with the people of God at war against the Philistines in a place called Ebenezer (“Rock of Help”). After being defeated in the first round of battle, the elders of the nation decide to bring out the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of the presence of God. The presence of the Ark had brought victory to Israel before. (Remember that line in Raiders of the Lost Ark: “The Bible speaks of the Ark leveling mountains and laying waste to entire regions. An army which carries the Ark before it... is invincible.”) The presence of the Ark even terrifies the opposing army and convinces them that they are about to be destroyed (1 Samuel 4:6–9). But it is not enough. The army of Israel is defeated, the two sons of the high priest are killed, and the Ark is taken captive by the Philistines. Eli, the high priest, falls down dead when he hears the news, and his newborn grandson is named Ichabod, “the glory has departed,” as a sign of mourning.

About a year later (after a number of fascinating and even humorous events that bring the Ark back to Israel), the army of Israel again fights the Philistines at Ebenezer. But this time, although they don’t bring out the Ark, Israel is victorious and casts off the oppression of the Philistines. What happened to make the difference? Why did the first army fail, and why did the second army succeed?

The first army suffered from fatal flaws. First, they thought that religious ritual alone could bring victory and blessing. There is no sign that they did anything else to honor God —just brought out the Ark. Like the Nazis in Raiders of the Lost Ark, they thought that mere possession of the Ark would grant power. Second, Israel relied on immoral leaders. God had already warned Eli the high priest that they were in danger because his two sons were breaking the priestly laws, extorting gifts from worshipers, and sleeping with the women who were appointed to serve in the Tabernacle (1 Samuel 2:15–25). These were not the men to carry the Ark and bring the presence of God before the people.

Why did the second army succeed? Samuel led the people into an inner transformation that went beyond just ritual. He helped them experience the real presence of God in their lives rather than trying to control God by bringing out the Ark. Samuel called the people to take inner and outer steps of repentance as they turned to God. They got rid of their idols to other gods, they fasted, prayed and confessed their sins; and when they went off to battle, Samuel remained behind, offering a sin sacrifice and praying for the people (1 Samuel 7:3–10).

We cannot expect blessing, whether as a whole congregation or as individual Christians, if we think that religious ritual alone pleases God. We are sometimes tempted to think that God has to bless if we attend everything we are supposed to. We sometimes expect victory because we experience emotional worship or because we make great promises to God. But the story of the victory at Ebenezer reminds us that God delights in genuine repentance and utter faithfulness to him. Both Samuel and the sons of Eli used religious ritual — but it was only Samuel’s that was acceptable to God. Samuel’s ritual (the sin sacrifice) was valuable because it was connected to genuinely transformed hearts. I believe that any ritual we participate in — whether it is worship, communion, baptism, laying on of hands, fasting or any other common Christian practice — only matters to God if it represents repentant and transformed hearts. Lord, as a church, we want to please you and experience your blessing. Please help our hearts to match our

Christian habits and rituals. Cause us to seek repentance and transformation, not merely empty ritual. And Father, we pray that all the rituals that we practice will be pleasing to you because they represent the reality of your presence in us.¹

Open It

1. Did you have a special possession as a child? What was it and why was it so special? Whatever happened to it?

Read It: 1 Samuel 4:1-7:17

(Our study covers a large portion of scripture with lots of action. Take time to read it in its entirety to learn about the story. For your study and questions we will break up the passage so it is more manageable.)

Because we are sinners, religion always looks more appealing than God Himself. First Samuel 4–7 shows that having symbols of God's presence is ultimately not as valuable as having the presence and blessing of God Himself. We can only experience this if we have a right relationship with God. Israel learns this lesson when God lets the Philistines conquer them in battle and capture the Ark of the Covenant, which is a physical representation of God's presence to the Israelites. The most important thing to catch in this section is that it points to the future day when God would embody His presence in Jesus Himself and in His people through His Spirit (cf. John 1:14; 14:16–17).

Explore It

1 Samuel 4:1-12

2. According to 1 Samuel 4:1–4, what happens to the nation of Israel?

3. What action do the Israelites take to remedy this?

4. What two responses do we see when the Ark of the Covenant is brought into the Israelite camp?

¹ <http://eutychusnerd.blogspot.com/2009/05/victory-at-ebenezer-1-Samuel-4-7.html>

5. Does Israel's strategy of using the Ark of the Covenant to win the battle work in their favor?

1 Samuel 4:13–22

6. In what two ways is Israel's defeat compounded in these verses?

7. How does the daughter-in-law of Eli assess the day's events?

1 Samuel 5

8. Upon capturing the Ark of the Covenant, how do things go for the Philistines?

1 Samuel 6:1–7:2

9. How do the Philistines decide to deal with the trouble that has come upon them as a result of having the Ark of the Covenant?

10. How do the people respond upon receiving the Ark in Israelite territory?

1 Samuel 7:3–17

11. What is Samuel's focus as he interacts with the people of Israel?

12. How does God respond to Israel's repentance the next time they face a military challenge?

Get It

The Israelites lose the Ark to the Philistines (4:1–5:12)

At the beginning of our passage, Israel is about to go to battle against the rival Philistines. Evidently, the battle doesn't take long because by verse 10 there are 34,000 Israelites killed. Notice verse 3 when it says, "And when the troops came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, 'Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines?'" God is the one behind the battle, controlling the outcome. He is going to teach Israel a hard lesson about depending on Him alone. After the tragedy on the battlefield, the Israelites don't turn to God. They turn to religion. They think the solution will be to "bring the ark of the covenant... that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies" (v. 3b). Here's the focus of our entire narrative: religion doesn't save; God does. The Israelites think a good luck charm would save them. They are wrong! In fact, Eli is so overwhelmed when he hears that the ark is captured by the Philistines that he falls off his chair, breaks his neck, and dies! When God's people turn to idols or symbols, he will use hard discipline to turn them in the right direction.²

13. In 1 Samuel 4 Israel experienced a serious military failure that devastated the entire nation. What is your response when you experience times of failure?

When have you seen God use a failure in your life for your good?

14. In 1 Samuel 4:3 we see that the Israelites seemingly blame God instead of themselves for their troubles. Why are we so quick to blame God for our troubles?

What does this type of deflecting tell us about our thoughts concerning God?

²<http://crupressgreen.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/godalone.pdf>

The Ark of the Covenant was very sacred to the Ancient Jews. It was a rectangular box made of acacia wood about 4 x 1.5 x 1.5 feet. It was covered with gold and was carried by poles that were inserted into rings located on the four corners. On top was a lid called "The Mercy Seat" which had two Cherubs with outstretched wings pointing towards each other. Inside of the Ark were the tablets of the Ten Commandments, a jar of manna, and Aaron's rod that budded (Hebrews 9:4). It served as the symbol of the very presence of God. The Ark of the Covenant was placed in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. Once a year, the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies and sprinkle blood on the Mercy Seat. This was symbolic of the forgiveness of the sins of the Jewish nation. The Ark of the Covenant is also called the "Ark of the Testimony" (Exodus 30:6), "Ark of God" (1 Samuel 3:3), and the "Ark of the covenant of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 10:8).³

15. The Israelites sought to use the Ark as a good luck charm that could be used as they saw fit to accomplish their desires. What spiritual good luck charms do we use today?

At the end of Chapter 4, we see a series of bad events take place not only for the nation of Israel, but also for Eli's family. In response to these events, Eli's daughter -in-law speaks about the absence of God's glory amidst the storm.

16. Why are we so quick to assume God is absent in our trials? What faulty theology did Eli's daughter-in-law have about God that allowed her to think this way?
17. In this passage we see that the Ark of the Covenant is placed on the same level as other lesser gods like Dagon. In what ways do we see this happening with the gods of our age?
18. While the capture of the Ark of the Covenant was a huge Philistine victory, it only caused pain and suffering for the entire Philistine nation. What does this part of the story tell us about God and His anger when His glory is disparaged or placed at the same level with lesser false gods?

³<https://carm.org/dictionary-ark-covenant>

God Returns the Ark to Israel (6:1–7:2)

After God causes quite an episode at Ashdod in 5:1–12, the Philistines decide to return the Ark to Israel. They send the Ark back to Israel on a cow-drawn cart with an offering to God. Still unsure if their affliction was an act of God (it's kind of hard to miss if you ask me), they declare that if the cows pull the Ark straight to Beth-shemesh, then God must have been the one causing the tumors, panic, and death in chapter 5. Well, the cows do pull the cart straight to the Israelite camp and when the Israelites see the ark coming, they rejoice (v. 13). Some of the men of Beth-shemesh even give offerings and sacrifices to the Lord, but others who "looked upon the ark of the LORD" are struck down by God for doing so (6:19). There is weeping and mourning for the dead men, as the Israelites stand in awe of God. This incident teaches us that God is the "One who is high and lifted up" (Isaiah 57:15) and is utterly and infinitely holier than anyone on earth.⁴

19. Why would God strike down the men who looked at the Ark of the Covenant? What does this teach us about how we should encounter God?

20. The Philistines were well aware of the history of the Israelites as seen in 1 Samuel 6:6. What truths might unbelievers know about God through their observations of your relationship with Him?

Samuel Judges Israel (7:3–17)

Our narrative ends with Samuel judging Israel for their sins, namely the sin of idolatry. Remember that Samuel is a prophet and he speaks as one authorized by God to the people. In 7:3, he gives a beautiful promise to Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods... and direct your heart to the LORD and serve Him only, and He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." God uses Samuel to start a stream of repentance in Israel. "We have sinned against the LORD," they cry (v. 6). Understand that though God is a jealous God who wants our affections to be on Him alone, He is gracious and merciful to forgive us when we confess our sin, turn from idols, and run to Him. In the midst of their confession and repentance, Israel is attacked by the Philistines again. Evidently, the Philistines have short-term memory loss. Though they won the first battle, God made life miserable for them in chapter 5 because they stole the Ark and now they want revenge. This time, because Israel turned from their sin, God "thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were routed before Israel" (7:10b). God is faithful to His promises: confess and turn to Him and He will fight for us; continue to trust in idols and religion and God will certainly send harsh discipline.⁵

⁴ <http://crupressgreen.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/godalone.pdf>

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21. 1 Samuel 4–7 shows the idolatry of both believers (Israelites) and unbelievers (Philistines) alike. What things in your life are competing with God?

What truths can we glean from this passage about God's response to the idolatrous hearts of people?

What steps need to be taken to deal with these idols?

22. What truths about God from 1 Samuel 4–7 cause you to “fear the Lord” more that you did before?

What causes even devout Christians to become too casual with God and His holy things?

How can we become more sober-minded and serious about our walks with God?

23. Reread the last part of our devotional from the beginning of the study. Take some time using this as an outline for your group's closing time.

Lord, as a church, we want to please You and experience your blessing. Please help our hearts to match our Christian habits and rituals. Cause us to seek repentance and transformation, not merely empty ritual. And Father, we pray that all the rituals that we practice will be pleasing to you because they represent the reality of Your presence in us.⁶

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