

The Weight of the Crown

God Isn't a Good Luck Charm

1 Samuel 4-7:2

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And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies." So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. As soon as the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, "What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" And when they learned that the ark of the LORD had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid, for they said, "A god has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness. Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight." So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died (1 Sam. 4:1-11, ESV).

On December 28, 1975, the Dallas Cowboys were playing the Minnesota Vikings in an NFL playoff game. The Cowboys quarterback, Roger Staubach, threw a 50-yard, game-winning touchdown pass to wide receiver Drew Pearson. After the game, Staubach was asked about the throw, and he said, "I closed my eyes and said a 'Hail Mary.'" The phrase stuck. Most of us now know what someone means when they say, "I threw a Hail Mary." A religious term for a Catholic prayer became culturally connected to a long pass or a half-court shot.

Or maybe you've said something important to a friend about his bad choices. Out of concern for the direction of his life, maybe you needed to speak candidly and bluntly. If your friend takes offense at your rebuke, he might say "Hey, man, don't preach at me."

Perhaps you were part of an athletic team and before every game you prayed the Lord's Prayer before running out onto the field or court.

What those examples highlight is the way that religious language, symbols, or activities can be incorporated into our lives in ways that are strange, unhelpful, or maybe even a bit inappropriate. Perhaps you think that these examples aren't a big deal. I'm sure that you could recognize that human beings sometimes use religion in ways that are inappropriate or self-serving. In a desire to make a point, rally a team, or unify a nation, spiritual language and symbols are used. Religion can be used as a way to get what you want.

This reminds me of what Jesus said in Matthew 15. "This people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:8-9). It's possible to teach the commandments of men as the doctrine of God. It's possible to treat God like a lackey, to give you what you want.

Throughout biblical history, we see many examples of treating God and his glory lightly or without the respect that he deserves. When this takes place, it brings terrible results. 1 Samuel 4-6 shows us an example of this. These chapters identify that **diminishing God's glory leads to tragedy**.

Last week we observed the contrast between Eli and his sons in comparison to Samuel. We saw the wickedness of Hophni and Phinehas along with the quiet obedience of Hannah. The text ended with the hopeful rise of Samuel as a prophet of God.

And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD (1 Sam. 3:19-20).

Chapters 4-6 take a dark turn. Samuel recedes to the background, and the glory of God becomes the focus. These chapters show us another contrast between the weightiness of God's glory and the tragedy of human choices.

Tragedy: "... and the ark of God was captured" (4:11)

Chapter 4 begins with an optimistic verse. It builds on the conclusion of chapter 3. The ministry of Samuel increased and spread over the entire nation. It seems like a positive statement. However, it doesn't last long.

Verses 1-11 describe a battle between Israel and the Philistines. We'll see much more about the Philistines in the rest of 1 & 2 Samuel. This city-state nation was a regular enemy of Israel, and they occupied the territory that we know today at Gaza. Most of us probably know the Philistines because of the story of David and Goliath.

A battle ensued in 1 Samuel 4, and Israel suffered a defeat. They lost 4,000 men, and they were dismayed asking, "Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?" (v. 3). The cycle in the book of Judges was for the people to cry out to God for help (see Judg. 3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6, 7; 10:10, 12). But instead of doing that, their solution was to bring the ark of the Lord from Shiloh.

The ark of the covenant was the central feature of the tabernacle. It was a small chest overlayed with gold. It featured two angels on the top which was called the mercy seat. Inside the ark was a copy of the law of God. It was here that the blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement, and it was from the mercy seat that God spoke with Moses. The ark was the most important element of the tabernacle because it was where God dwelt.

Rather than seeking God, the leaders sought the ark. Take note of this and listen to how this is described:

So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God (1 Sam. 4:4).

This is one of those moments that should create a scenario where you shake your head, knowing that it's going to turn out badly.

At first, it seemed to be effective because the people cheered (vv. 5-7). The Philistines are afraid because they know the story about God's deliverance of his people from Egypt (vv. 7-8), but they call one another to boldness in their fight against Israel.

Philistia and Israel fought again. This time 30,000 Israelite soldiers died. While this is terrible, verse 11 delivers the tragic news: "And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died." The deaths of Hophni and Phinehas were prophesied earlier in 1 Samuel, but the capture of the ark is incredibly tragic. Why?

This is a clear example of God's people trying to use God to get what they want. It's an attempt to manipulate an earthly scenario through the use of spirituality. Now, I'm not talking about heartfelt prayer where you are asking God to intervene. This is referring to using God, religion, or spiritual truths in order to achieve the success that you want. One commentator said this: "Whenever the church stops confessing 'Thou art worthy' and begins chanting 'Thou art useful'—well, then you know the ark of God has been captured again."¹

This tends to appear when people have strong emotions, get desperate, or are scared. In our desire for security and assurance, we look for things that give us control. One resource that humans use is spirituality. We want what God gives us; we don't want God himself.

Let me encourage you to listen for this in the world around you and maybe in your own life. It can show up in parenting, leadership, business, politics, and sports. When humans are stuck, there's a temptation to use God—"thou art useful versus thou art worthy."

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, [*1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart*](#), Focus on the Bible Commentary (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 55.

Tragedy: “the glory has departed . . .” (4:21)

The second part of our story makes this tragedy explicitly clear. The previous passage should create a deep sense of grief because the ark has been captured, but 4:12-22 makes the point very evident with the death of Eli and the birth of a boy named Ichabod.

We learn in verses 12-16 about a messenger who ran from the battle to deliver the news to Eli. He had been anxiously waiting for an update, and it’s clear that he was concerned about the ark of God (v. 13). Eli receives the terrible news:

Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a great defeat among the people. Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured (1 Sam. 4:17).

The effect of this news was Eli fell backwards. A broken neck ended his life and forty years of ministry in Israel. The prophecy was fulfilled. But there’s more, and it’s related to the birth of another child.

The scene shifts to Phinehas’s wife who was pregnant. When she learned that her husband was dead, her father-in-law was dead, and the ark had been captured, it pushed her into labor. The “thud” of Eli falling backwards was replaced with the cries of a woman in childbirth. The situation became even worse as the birth turned deadly for Phinehas’s wife. She was dying.

The women who attended her attempted to provide comfort (v. 20). But there was no joy in her heart. Her final words were to name her son Ichabod. In Hebrew the name has the word “glory” (kavod) in it. The word means weightiness, honorable, majestic. But “i-kavod” means “what glory?” or “where’s the glory?” The writer of 1 Samuel wanted to make this point clear. Sometimes the points in the story are more implicit. Not here. It’s even repeated.

And she named the child Ichabod, saying, “The glory has departed from Israel!” because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. And she said, “The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured” (1 Sam. 4:21-22).

God was no longer with his people. He’s no longer with them. God had been captured by the Philistines because of the foolish and self-centered actions of the people of Israel. This was a major low point in Israel’s history. The tabernacle was now just a useless tent. Their plan to use God backfired.

Oh friends, this is the consistent and tragic story of humanity. It’s Eve taking the forbidden fruit, Adam blaming God, Jacob bargaining with God, Elijah complaining to God, Jonah running away from God. It’s Peter’s rebuke of Jesus, John and James’s desire to call down fire on unbelievers, the rich young ruler’s question, and Judas’s betrayal. Time and time again human beings blame, bargain, and use God. It ends in disaster. But not for God.

Thankfully, God is far more passionate for his glory than we are. What looks like a disaster, even ones that we’ve created, God is able to turn around. God is able to redeem. However, the primary motivation is not because of the worthiness of us. Oh no! God changes the world for his own glory.

Over and over in 1-2 Samuel you will see what's really going on is God and his glory. The weightiness of his glory is what really matters. Listen, that's one of the many reasons why Sundays matter. This is the moment when we're reminded who's in charge, what's important, and what's worth living for. Life is a glory battle, and this is where we see what's really going on.

Glory: "the hand of the Lord was heavy . . ." (5:6)

Chapter 5 shows us how God doesn't need our help. The disaster created by the choices of humans is going to be remedied by God alone. And there's some important lessons here about the glory of God. In short, God is zealous for his own glory.

We learn that the Philistines took the ark and placed it in the temple of Dagon. For those of you who know the story of Samson, it was in the temple of Dagon that the blind Samson pulled the support pillars out bringing judgment. The ark was placed in the temple as a statement of submission. In the ancient Near East, battles between nations were not only conflicts between armies, they were also conflicts between gods.

We read in verses 3-5 that over the course of two days, the image of Dagon fell down before the ark of God. The first day the idol was merely put upright. But the second event resulted in the cutting off of Dagon's head and hands. It's a statement. Sam Emadi said, "The Philistines think their god has gained the upper hand, but now he has no hands."²

The problems in Philistia got worse. Besides the humiliation of their idol, the people began experiencing tumors. The writer of 1 Samuel made a clear connection that the health issues were because "the hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod" (v. 6). Their solution was to move the ark from Ashdod to Gath to Ekron (vv. 7-10). The Philistines started passing the ark off on neighboring cities. They played "hot potato" with the ark, and it created panic within the nation. They were experiencing the judgment of God. Israel had nothing to do with this, and it's like what we find in the book of Exodus as God delivered through judgment. God was defending his name by himself.

Remember that there's a connection between "heavy" and "glory"? Chapter 5 repeatedly talks about the weightiness and heaviness of God. It reaches a climax in verses 11-12:

They sent therefore and gathered together 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, that it may not kill us and our people." For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there. The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven (1 Sam. 5:11-12).

The Philistines realized that they needed to get rid of this ark by sending it back to Israel.

² <https://www.9marks.org/conversations/1-samuel-4-7-on-elis-death-dagons-destruction-and-the-philistines-wondering-about-yhwahs-return-policy-bible-talk-ep-85/>

Glory: “Who is able to stand before the Lord?” (6:20)

In chapter 6 they devised a plan to return the ark of God. To atone for their actions and (in their minds) to appease the God of Israel, they provided an offering of golden tumors and golden mice (vv. 1-6). Then they put the ark of God on a cart with the golden tumors and golden mice in a box next to the ark. They took two milking cows and yoked them to the cart, while taking away their young calves (vv. 7-11).

They used milking cows because this whole situation is a test. By taking away their calves and using milking cows, it was very unlikely that these cows were going to pull anything. Their instinct would cause them to resist the yoke and to seek out their calves. But the cows left for the nearest Israelite city, Beth Shemesh. The leaders of Philistia walked with them until they reached the border.

According to verse 13, the people of Beth Shemesh rejoiced at the sight of the ark. The cart stopped in the field of a man named Joshua, and the people offered sacrifices to the Lord (v. 14). They even erected a monument stone in the field as a memorial (v. 18).

However, some men from Beth Shemesh looked inside the ark of the Lord, and seventy men were struck dead (v. 19). As a result, they wanted the ark to leave. They said, “Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?” (v. 20) They appealed to the people of Kiriath Jearim to take possession of the ark. They moved the ark to the house of Abinadab “on the hill” and charged his son, Eleazar, to take care of the ark (7:1).

The ark remained in the house of Abinadab until David moved it in 2 Samuel 6, the time that Uzzah was killed for touching it when the oxen stumbled. The ark remained here for twenty years, and it was a spiritually dark season for the nation. Our text ends with “. . . and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord” (7:2).

Do you see the connection in this text between God’s glory and human tragedy? Diminishing God’s glory leads to tragedy. The warning here is for us to not treat God and his glory lightly. To be careful that we do not embrace the statement “thou are useful” when we should be saying “thou are worthy.” Let’s embrace the caution to not use God to get what we want or be angry with him when he doesn’t conform to our expectations.

There’s something else here, however, that I think is important to consider. It’s the way that God works without any human assistance for the purpose of his own glory. Isn’t this what the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus is all about? What did any human being do to make that happen? Nothing! And isn’t this what salvation is all about? It is God who justifies. It is God who rescues. It is God who calls. It is God who saves. In other words, God doesn’t need our help.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness

toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:4-8).

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