

== IN SEARCH OF A KING ==

Understanding 1 Samuel

Week Commencing 22nd August 2022

Notes for next Sunday's sermon covering 1 Samuel 4-7

DAY 1: Read 1 Samuel 4

Chapters 1-3 showed us the power of God. The birth of Samuel to the childless Hannah was an answer to her prayers. Chapters 4-7 are also about the power of God but what we see will surprise and challenge us. Yet we ought not to be surprised because God had warned Samuel in 3:11 that he was about "*to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle.*" That is, he would bring judgement on Eli and his sons because the sons had made themselves contemptible and Eli had failed to restrain them.

The Philistines, like the Israelites, were relative newcomers to the region. They had settled in the coastal plain to the west of the hill country where the main Israelite occupation had taken place at roughly the same time. There appears to have been a long struggle for the control of the region between the Philistines and the Israelites. The battle reported here is a disaster from the Israelites' point of view, raising for them a serious question: Why were God's people so soundly defeated when he had rescued them from Egypt centuries earlier and gone before them in to the land he had promised? See v3! They interpreted their defeat as an act of God rather than an achievement of the Philistines, yet they did not know why. But they should have! As judgement against their rebellion, God brought many a defeat on them, marking the last 200 years in the period of the Judges. The corruption of Eli's sons was also well known as God had promised imminent punishment on the house of Eli. Yet so far was their sin from their mind, let alone God's judgement, that they answered their 'why' question with a plan to bring the Ark of the Covenant up from Shiloh. (The Ark was the covenant box containing the tablets inscribed with the 10 Commandments, symbolising the rule and presence of God.) We presume that they thought that having the Ark there would guarantee victory. They thought of it in magical or superstitious terms, as if its presence would itself bring God's power to their side. But of course, this was never going to work whilst Eli's corrupt sons were involved. The second battle brought many more casualties than the first and in the end, as God had determined, both Eli and his sons were killed. Eli's grandson born at the time was named Ichabod, because, just as the Ark had been captured, so had the glory of God departed from Israel.

Of course, much later in Israel's history, at the time of the Babylonian exile, the prophet Ezekiel would have a vision of the glory of the Lord departing from the temple in Jerusalem and going to Babylon (Ezekiel 10). The glory itself was exiled. Where do we see God's glory now? In the person of Jesus. John 1:14: "*the Word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us, and have seen his glory.*" The glory has now come in Jesus Christ!

DAY 2: Read 1 Samuel 5

Defying or denying the power of God seems to have been a popular pastime throughout history. And people around us today seem to be playing that game as well. In fact, these days, the power of God causes few to tremble. Sometimes we ourselves treat it lightly! Likewise, the Israelites were *presuming* on God's power, while the Philistines were *denying* God's power. Yet, of course, it was the most foolish game in the world.

The Israelites thought that the gold-plated box known as the Ark of the Covenant would result in God saving them from the Philistines. It didn't. The Philistines thought that the Ark's presence in the Israelites' camp posed a threat to them. It didn't. And then the Philistines thought they could take hold of the Ark with impunity. They couldn't. Their actions with the Ark showed their delight in their win. They thought that they had not only conquered Israel but the *God* of Israel Himself. Placing the ark next to Dagon, their high god, sent a clear statement. Overnight, however, something happened in Dagon's temple! Dagon had fallen face down on the ground before the ark of the Lord and the next night, Dagon was smashed in pieces. Dagon could do nothing. Obviously, he never could, but now his powerlessness was on display. The God of Israel was the powerful one! As the Ark of the Lord was subsequently passed from one city to the next, the people

responded with terrified panic as the impact of the Ark's presence was tragically felt. In desperation, they determined to send the Ark back to Israel.

There is a pattern here. When people defy God, it might look at first as though defying Him is feasible. But it is not! When they nailed Jesus to a cross, it looked as though defying God worked. But early on Resurrection Sunday something happened in the tomb that demonstrated God's victory once and for all. As Paul said in Colossians 2:15, "*He disarmed rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them at the cross.*" Defying God is as foolish as it sounds and far more absurd than it often looks. But when our hearts are melted at the Cross, we recognize God as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

DAY 3: Read 1 Samuel 6

A great crisis is described in 6:1: the Ark of the Lord was in the land of the Philistines, their enemies, for seven months. For the first time, it was in enemy hands and had only brought disaster wherever it was. Reminiscent of the language of the Exodus when Pharaoh wanted God's people 'sent away', the Philistines now wanted the ark 'sent away'. Just as the Israelites were not to leave Egypt 'empty-handed', so now, the Philistines wanted to return the Ark with gold objects and a guilt offering in the hope that their disasters would come to an end.

They followed the advice of the priests and diviners, and the outcome was astonishing. The cows went straight in the direction of Beth-shemesh. That day, the road became a highway for God! This was not Israel coming out of Egypt, but the Ark of the Lord coming out of the land of the Philistines. God was at work!

This strange story of the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord reflects the message of the whole Bible: that the God of Israel is the one whose power always and inevitably accomplishes his purposes. God has power to raise the dead, to turn humiliation to triumph and suffering to joy; indeed, to wipe away every tear. God is not dependent on us to do his work! The truth is that we serve a God who is immeasurably powerful. The one who brought the Ark up from the Philistines is the one who raised Jesus from the dead and he will accomplish his purposes. His victory does not depend on you or me any more than it depended on the people of Israel! It is our 'job' to trust God, not to defy him!

DAY 4: Read 1 Samuel 7

It is perfectly clear that the relationship between Israel and God was in serious difficulty. It wasn't only about the corrupt sons of Eli; the issue came to its clearest expression at the end of ch 6. Because they 'looked into the Ark of the Lord', God struck down a number of the men of Beth-shemesh. The situation between Israel and God had not improved. Notice in 6:20 how they ask, "*Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God? To whom shall the Ark go up from here?*" The Philistines had passed the Ark around like it was a hot potato; now it was Israel's turn. And so the Ark ended up at Kiriath Jearim at Abinadab's house, guarded by his son Eleazar.

Sadly, it was probably only *after* 20 years (v3) that the people of Israel *finally* mourned and sought the Lord. In the intervening period, we are to understand that the Israelites had little or nothing to do with the Lord. But now, they were returning with tears. Samuel wanted to know if their tears and intentions were genuine. Why? Because repentance is not just weeping. It is '*returning to the LORD with all your heart*', and as a consequence, putting away foreign gods. Pagan ways must be repudiated and God's people must serve him with a single-minded, whole-hearted commitment. The Lord, and the Lord alone, must hold their hearts. According to v4, Israel obeyed Samuel's message: "*So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashthoreths, and served the LORD only.*" This was a remarkably important moment for Israel. Twenty years of apostasy had come to an end!

What Samuel had called upon Israel to do, God calls upon us to do today: to turn from the idols of our culture and our hearts to serve the one true and living God. We are to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (see 1 Thessalonians 1:9,10). Have you turned from idols to serve exclusively the true God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Rejoice if you have in the riches of God's mercy for you and continue in your heartfelt, single-minded and joyful service of him!

(Notes prepared using John Woodhouse's 1 Samuel commentary.)