

## Transcription of 19ID3313

1 Samuel 4-5      "Icons, Idols and Religions Versus True Faith"      May 8, 2019

Let's open our Bibles tonight to 1 Samuel 4 & 5. If you'd like to give your testimony, you're welcome to call the office, and we'll get you up here. It's good to tell what God has done in your life, don't you think?

1 & 2 Samuel, which are part of the historical books that we are heading through now - towards the end of the historical books, actually - cover a period of time from the last judge, who was Samuel. Samuel was born about 1100 B.C. And it goes forward through the life of Saul and then almost to the end of David's life, around 970 B.C. So all of these pages, but only 130 years of history, which is interesting, especially since tonight we're going to skip several years and next week fifteen-twenty more years. So God has a way of picking and choosing what He wants us to know, and we trust that, because they're narrative, we just learn what He sets before us.

So far in our book we've seen the situation or the circumstances that surrounded Samuel's birth. His mom was a wife to a husband who had two wives. Hannah loved the LORD but was unable to have children; Peninnah, the other wife, seemed to have them regularly. It caused her great consternation. She went to Shiloh where the tabernacle of the LORD stood - for three times, those weeks of worship every year as a Jew - and cried out to God; but for years the LORD didn't hear. We are told, in chapter 1, of a year that she went there and made a vow to the LORD, which I think the LORD was waiting to hear come out of her mouth, that, "If You would give me a son, I would give him back to serve You all the days of his life." No longer a prayer to get even or prayers to stand out or, "Bless me now." It was just, "God, use me." And by the end of that next year, Hannah had a child - named him Samuel = "The LORD has heard me." And Samuel was born. She weaned him for two, three, four, maybe even five years before she took this boy, with her husband in agreement, back to the tabernacle at Shiloh, where it was standing, to give him and leave him there with Eli, who was the high priest at the time, to be tutored by him.

Chapter 2 tells us the story of these two families - Hannah's family and her son that she left there at the tabernacle; and Eli, the fellow who was the chief spiritual leader (supposedly) in the faith there, if you will, at the time. Hannah, in

chapter 2, prayed and said to the LORD, "I know that You know the heart." She said, in verse 9 of chapter 2, "I know that man does not prevail by his own strength." And so Hannah had learned to trust the LORD. She left her son, the one she had prayed for for so long, in the care of a man who had not done very well in raising his own family - hadn't disciplined his two boys which served there, hadn't chastened them for their awful behavior. He knew about the misuse of their place. They stumbled, according to chapter 2:17, a lot of the folks who came. The judgment of God was headed for Eli and his family because of the abuse of the place of power. And yet God began to bless Samuel and to raise him up in the midst of that very unlikely situation. At the end of chapter 2, there's a prophet that comes to Eli - Samuel is still a young boy, maybe 4 or 5 years old, 6 years old - and tells him that if things don't get better, that's going to be it. "Deal with your boys." And he doesn't.

Ten years later chapter 3 takes place. Samuel is now 13 years old or so, and he has his first experience of hearing from God. And not only recognizing God's voice but the first test of would he share what God wanted to say. He would be a prophet that would be speaking to a nation that came out of the judges period - they weren't doing very well - and so it would be his first real test. Would he speak all that the LORD declares? And the first thing God said was, "Go tell Eli this is it for him. I warned him. It's been ten years. He hasn't made any changes whatsoever. His sons were vile. He didn't correct them or admonish them." And so Samuel, in chapter 3, gets up, and he speaks clearly, if you will, to Eli. He lays out that God was serious. And, as he was faithful there as a young teenager, God began to use him, to raise him up. In fact, you'll read that towards the end of chapter 3 - that all of Israel began to know that Samuel was a prophet, and God began to show up again in Shiloh, and the LORD began to reveal Himself through this prophet - the first guy in the office of a prophet, if you will, as he began to share God's Word with others.

Tonight we will continue in our chronology. We hope to go through chapters 4 and 5. It's one story. Nearly twenty-five years will pass before we get to this story (between chapter 3 and 4). Samuel is now pushing 40. So what happened during all of the times that God doesn't report? All we know is what we read towards the end of chapter 3 - that God was establishing Himself through Samuel and Samuel begins to step forward again as the LORD had other things to show us.

So, we'll start in verse 1, and notice it reads, "And the word of Samuel" (or, if you will, the word of the LORD through Samuel, according to the two verses before) "came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines, and encamped beside Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped in Aphek." Though God had raised up this young man to now being a middle-aged prophet, though he had transmitted himself across the nation for years - he had been delivering God's Word, he was one of very few that was doing so - the people, as a whole, had not returned from their wickedness in that judges period because of Samuel's ministry. So even though he'd been faithful for twenty-five years, he had little to show for it. I mention that to you because sometimes being faithful is all that you have; you can't really show the fruit of faithfulness, the doors haven't opened like you wanted them to, you may feel like, "Gosh, I'm failing." But Samuel's not failing here. He has been very faithful to represent the LORD, to share what he'd been assigned to share. I don't doubt that part of the difficulty for Samuel was the inability of the nation to trust the servants of the LORD who had suffered at the hands of Eli's wicked kids for a long time. These kids had taken offerings that the people brought to the LORD. They had pushed them around with their powerful position. They had had sexual relationships with the women who came seeking God. They were horrible people. And no doubt sometimes Samuel must have felt like the one jewel in the midst of this wickedness. These boys ran the tabernacle as a business for themselves.

But that's not really enough to explain what was going on. I mean, people had been away from the LORD for generations. And so Samuel's message had always been one of repentance, "Come on! Come and trust the LORD. Return to God." And precious few people had listened. So the nation of Israel - we find them, here in chapter 3, with Samuel in his late thirties, satisfied with an outward, in-name-only, religious kind of unawareness of God. They were religious people that had lost the conscious awareness of God. And that's always a dangerous place to be, as certainly one of the lessons in our chapters tonight. They believed in God, but they had no heart for God. They had no relationship with God. They went through the motions. They kept the outward appearance. They had a tabernacle. They had a prophet. They brought offerings. But they were far removed from God. In fact, they were much like the unbelievers, the heathen ..... like they were facing the Philistines. They had icons, and they had idols, and they had religious fervor, but they had no assurance and no peace and no blessing from God at all. Except for this opening couple of verses here, especially verse 1, there is no more mention of Samuel or his counsel from the LORD until the time you get to chapter 7. So it is

almost as if God's Word is available, but the people don't want to hear it. So, in the history lesson, in the narrative, Samuel steps away. It's almost as if the LORD says, "Okay, go ahead. Follow your religious way of life. Make your determinations without God. And learn that the only true path of victory over the enemy" (here, the Philistines) "would be a whole-hearted return back to the LORD." For now, though they had heard from the LORD for twenty-five years, from a very faithful prophet, the nation as a whole had set God aside and were on their own, and so the Word of the LORD through Samuel was nowhere to be found. It's worthless to them; they're not listening. Notice even the connection, here in verse 1. God's Word is available through Samuel, but the people of Israel go out to battle their enemies, ignoring or even not seeking God's promises for themselves. The Word is available. Samuel is available. He's been faithful. He'll tell you what you need to know. God used him to speak to the nation, but they weren't interested in what he had to say.

Here's the lesson you should not forget - defeat is imminent when God is not eminent, or defeat is imminent if God is not. If the Lord isn't close to you, you're probably going to get beat up. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Notice the "word" was around. "The word of Samuel came to all Israel." They knew it; they just didn't embrace it. So off they go into battle with the most powerful enemy that Israel faced in that generation - and for generations to follow - the Philistines.

Verse 2 tells us, "Then the Philistines put themselves in battle array against Israel. And when they joined battle, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men of the army in the field. And when the people had come into 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 from Shiloh to us, that when it comes among us it may save us from the hand of our enemies.' So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who dwells between the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. And when the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted so loudly that the earth shook." So, they go to battle - and we already mentioned they're not listening to the LORD - and a horrible thing happens. Horrific. They lose four thousand men in one battle. That's a lot of loss. You can read through the Old Testament. That's a big defeat.

In explaining and teaching us, the LORD gives us a glimpse into both camps to see what's going on. Into Israel's camp, here in verses 3, 4, 5 and then 6-9 or so, into the Philistine camp. And one of the things that you discover as you set them together is that they think very much alike; and that should never be. God's people are separate. Right? We're called out. We're supposed to be different. But there was way too much in common. Israel had become like the heathen. And Israel had sacrificed or lost its singular greatest advantage which was they knew Almighty God: they knew of His power, they had His promises, His Spirit was with them. But having set aside this personal relationship and trust with Him, with the fact that they weren't obedient to Him (because that was His criteria), "Follow Me, obey Me," they had lost their advantage. And so you find these two camps very much the same.

Notice, in verse 3, that there's a meeting called after these four thousand men had been killed and some kind of strategy session, if you will, and here's the brain trust. There's no real leader at this time. There's no central authority. God had been speaking only through one leader, the pastor, the prophet, if you will. We don't know who these elders were. We don't know why Eli, the priest, wasn't there because, in his official position, he could have been seeking the LORD. That's how God spoke so often to the people. We don't know why Samuel wasn't invited to this meeting either; he could have been there and shared, as he'd always done, faithfully to what God was saying (been at it twenty-five years). The question's legitimate. They recognized that it was the LORD that had allowed them to be defeated. And that's right. God's in charge. And the question "why?" is kind of pregnant with possibility. Had they thought about it - I think if the people had sat down and looked to each other and said, "We're not very close to the LORD. God has always blessed His people when we've looked to Him, but let's face it - we haven't been doing that." There was no desperation in their lives to repent. There was no sorrow over sin. There was no hunger for the LORD. They got together and went, "Well, all right. What did we do wrong?" And they didn't look to themselves or to their walk with God at all. Instead, without praying or seeking God, without the godly advice of someone like Samuel, who God had been speaking through almost exclusively all those years, they concluded that what they really needed was God's presence among them; and the only way that they could assure that was to go get this ark of the covenant, to get this thing built by man's hands - at the counsel of God to Moses and others - so that Israel would have a place to come and meet with God, a place of sacrifice, a place where God's presence could be realized. And so they decided that what they needed to do was get this ark

into battle, which, by the way, is the same kind of ritualistic idolatry that every nation around them provided. They all went to battle under the auspices of their god, whoever that god seemed to be; under the banner of their false gods. So amazingly, no one in this - I call them brain trust because they're obviously not having any - group of people in the meeting felt remotely guilty or even personalized it. They had quickly forgotten, I think, the lesson that certainly could have been learned from the last several hundred years of judges' rule that every time you were defeated, it was because God was on the back burner and, "If you put Him where He belonged, we could bring Him back. He hadn't forsaken us, we'd forsaken Him." But no one, somehow, came up with that; these were blind, still in sin, determined to almost follow pagan practices of hauling any representation of your god of choice into battle so that you could assure his help and his victory. So they look very much - verses 3-5, 6-9 - as the superstitious heathen. I can hear, almost, Samuel's old guy already, his response if he'd have been counseled about this. Instead of a meeting of the minds, if they'd just had a prayer time I think it would have done them a lot of good because they might have come up with this answer, "We're the cause of our defeat. We brought this on ourselves. God didn't go with us because God doesn't want to go with us in our condition." And so what they did instead was that they turned to the ark. His presence, alone, would be what they wanted, but how they thought that they could get Him there was an entirely different thing.

It's interesting because it's common, I think, that we're very slow to admit that it is our fault why things are going the way they are, that we face defeat sometimes. It could just be that the Lord has put us in difficult spots. But more often than not it seems that defeat, for the believer, is directly tied to his unwillingness, or her unwillingness, to let God be God. So we're out there getting beat up by the flesh or by the devil or by the world, and we rack our brains for all kinds of reasons why it's happened. And the reason's sittin' right with ya. Just look in the mirror, so often. Right? Our lack of commitment to the Lord. We blame people when things don't go well, bad planning, terrible advertising, bad weather, poor presentation. We'll look for a hundred reasons except the right one - which is we've embraced our sinful ways and, until tragedy strikes, we're not willing to admit it. Well, tragedy has struck. Four thousand Jews dead. And they're to be God's people. So, wanting to escape the more difficult admission of guilt, they'd rather start to try to change the ritual. "Let's bring the ark," or, if you want to put it in modern terms, "We'll just pray more, go to church more often, plan ahead, change our procedures." But the real problem is sin. That was the real problem here.

Right? Psalm 66:18, "If I regard iniquity in my heart," (the word "regard" means to make room for, to tolerate, to embrace) "the LORD will not hear." Samuel will say, down the road, to Saul (1 Samuel 15:22), "Do you really think God has as great a delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, in that you would just be obedient to His voice?" You see. But it's so easy. It's much easier to sacrifice than it is to listen. Right? It's harder to do the right thing, to turn to the Lord, if you will, in the things that we're going through.

And so the root of the problem was they were being overcome by their enemies because they'd left without God. In their collective wisdom, they now say, "Well, what we need is the ark, and then we'll show 'em. Go get it." And they did. We are told, in verse 4, that they went to Shiloh, they took custody of the ark from these two very horrible men, Hophni and Phinehas, the wicked sons of Eli who, by the way, had now been going at this for almost three decades of stealing and adultery and stumbling the people and turning them away from the LORD. And these representatives of the nation show up to gather this ark, but they fail to make the distinction between the ark as a symbol of God's presence and a place of meeting between them and God. It isn't God. It's a place of meeting, at best. Right? The LORD said, "I'll meet you here, and here's how you can get close to Me," and His actual presence. Notice, in verse 3 (and I just point it out to you as we read it), it says (towards the end) "that when it comes among us it may save us from the hand of our enemies." It's not "the LORD comes," it's "it," when "it" comes. What? When this ark comes. "Forget the LORD. We just need that thing that enables us to get together." So they're looking exactly like the heathen. They're going to carry their God into battle. Years later, 1 Chronicles 13-14, David is in several battles where he overthrows the enemies of God. Walking with God, the LORD just blesses him mightily. And you can read there that he finds a bunch of their gods, and so David just piles them all up and sets fire to all of it. And the Philistines make another raid, and they come after him again. And David turns to the LORD, and he says, "What do I do now? I know their gods can help them, but I can't carry an icon into battle. LORD, what do You want?" And he had a direct relationship with God, and God was able to speak, and rather than this foolishness you're seeing here, you see David walking with God and checking with God as to how to proceed in the next battle.

So Israel, here, tries to localize God. By that, I mean God's omnipresent, He's all-powerful. "We're gonna put Him in this little box. We're gonna use Him even though we have no commitment to Him. We're gonna treat Him like the world

treats its idols. We're gonna carry Him into battle." Had they known Psalm 115:3-8, - that whole passage that talks about, "Our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases; their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands; they have mouths, but they do not speak; eyes they have, but they do not see; feet they have, but they do not walk," they would have been, I think, ashamed of themselves because that's not how God works. Our God lives. Jeremiah wrote, in chapter 32:17, "Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for You." It's far different than this! "Let's bring God's house with us and see if that'll work." Their faith was not in Him; it was in their religious life and, in this case, was in the ark. Whenever you find people beginning to replace God with symbols or symbolism, it's a pretty good indicator that they've lost the conscious awareness of a relationship with God in their lives. They're aware He's there - and I don't think that they would deny it - but from a practical standpoint, they don't see Him anymore. You don't need a relic if you're walking with God.

When we bought this building, there was a cross outside ..... covered with bird droppings. And it had rotted over the years, and we wanted to tear it up and throw it away because it was a disgrace. Except we had a fellow in our church who said, "That's a cross! You can't get rid of that." So I said, "Take it home." Now, it was thirty feet tall, but he did. I just couldn't reason with that. God is here. That bird dung-infested cross is an embarrassment. But sometimes, when you have that lack of an awareness of where God is, you start to fall in love with things around Him. We're gonna tear down some buildings. "Oh, I got saved in that building." No. You got saved because the Lord saved you! And if the building moves, God won't. You know what I'm sayin'? You can't fall in love with the icon; you have to fall in love with God. If you can't see the Lord, but you're in love with the chair you were..... "I sat right there!" I took my wife home to Holland last year to show her where I was born in The Hague. I had my address, I knew where it was, and we went around the corner, and my house is gone. (Laughing) Where I was born, it is not a convenience store. I was still born, but my house is gone.

Hezekiah, when he caused the reforms - to be built again, removing all the high places and all and the wood images and all - there's a piece of a brass serpent from Moses that the children of Israel had burned incense to; and he got rid of that, too. People were mad, "That's a relic!" And he called it Nehushtan. It's a word that means "it's just a thing of brass." "Come on, man. We serve a God who's alive! It's the world that worships idols."

So, here, the nation had lost the awareness of God's reality, and so they pursue these kinds of religious peripherals, which looks a lot like the world around them. If they had an intimacy with God, that would have been fine. But they're bringing this ark almost like a "lucky charm." Right? Remember, it's the ark of the covenant. The word "covenant" meant agreement from two sides. You make a promise, He makes a promise. That's a covenant. All of the promises were pretty much God's to you and to me. But, needless to say, God's promises were dependent upon their willful allegiance. Had they known the LORD, I don't think these four thousand people would have died in battle. Instead of turning to the LORD now, with four thousand dead, they opted to choose a box made of acacia wood, covered in gold, with a couple of stone tablets inside that spoke of God's Word (that had been broken by them), and Aaron's rod (that had budded) to speak of God's power to deliver them, and a jar of manna that spoke of God's provision. And all of that they ignored. "We just want the box. We carry the box out there, then God's with us because, let's face it, we always met God at the box." They felt they were now in possession of God rather than God was in possession of them. That's a horrible picture, isn't it?

So, repentance would have helped out. But this isolated them further. And, like I said, the natural tendency of all of us in our disposition is that it's much easier to increase religious externals or attention to detail rather than seeking after God from the heart and putting Him first. It's like the difference between singing on key and worshipping from the heart. Now if you're up here leading in worship, you probably should sing on key, or else we may be distracted. However, you just need to worship. Right? God doesn't care how you sound. Your pew mates might, but that doesn't really concern the Lord. It's kind of like going to church versus seeking God, or carrying your Bible versus obeying it, or, for that matter, wearing a cross and you not coming to the cross. How many people do you know that wear crosses like good-luck charms? If you ever see a person with a cross, ask them if they're saved. "Hey, I see you've got a cross. Are you saved?" Great place to start talking to them. "Yes, mine is blessed and 18-karat gold. This chain I got in Rome." Yeah, good luck with that. Be careful because even the symbols God appoints to us can become snares. Baptism's important. But a lot of people get trapped in a religious behavior that has nothing to do with forsaking our flesh and walking with God. Same thing with communion. Right?

So they take the ark, verse 5.....we'll get there, don't worry. I'm gonna pick up the pace. We'll be fine. You're all lookin' at your watch. We'll be out of here by 11:00.

By the way, how many of you saw "The Avenger" movie, anyway? How many of you? Come on. I saw it. How much was it? Three hours long. Right? So don't you complain if I go 5 minutes over. (Laughing) Been usin' that all week. Fits perfect. I don't think I will, but anyway.....verse 5.....and we're doing two chapters, and I'm on verse 5. We're okay. The ark is taken, it arrives in camp with shouts of arrogance and confidence. It should have been met with tears and repentance of sin and silence. No one in the camp had ever seen the Holy of Holies except the high priest once a year; they weren't supposed to see it. God is holy. Symbolic of God's presence - not to be taken lightly. But they yell crazily; they're mad, they're dependent upon their idolatry.

Well, now let's go to the other camp. Verse 6, "Now when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, 'What does the sound 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. So the Philistines were afraid, for they said, 'God has come into the camp!' And they said, 'Woe to us! For such a thing has never happened before. Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness.' " And then they said, " 'Be strong and conduct yourselves like men, you Philistines, that you do not become servants of the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Conduct yourselves like men, and fight!' " The other camp is the "un" kind of.....they're not disguised. Undisguised. Is that even a word? They're laid bare. Here's their view, and it's very much the same as the Jews' except they view this from a polytheistic kind of stance. To them, their god was Dagon. Dagon had the hands and the face of a man and the tail of a fish (that's got to be really godlike). But, needless to say, they viewed the ark coming into the battle as, "Oh, man. Now the deck is stacked against us. We've never seen that happen." But they were frightened in the same way that they Jews believed this was going to be helpful. Right? So, as idol worshippers, they remembered vaguely the stories of 500 years earlier when God had brought the Jews out of Egypt to deliver them. And yet they grit their teeth, "Fight like men. Put on your tough face. Put on your big-boy pants," if you will. "We're not gonna be slaves like them. Dagon will help us. We'll take our god with us." Now you put yourself in God's shoes for a minute. You've got to make Yourself known to Your people who are no longer looking at You as a Person but as an idol while, at the same time, convincing these Philistines You're Almighty God. So You're kind of in a dilemma, aren't You? Well, God's not in a dilemma, but just reading it from our sense, what are you gonna do?

Well here's the terse report, verse 10, "So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent. There was a very great slaughter, and there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers." Thirty thousand! "Also the ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died." Yeah, no big loss the way those guys are goin'. So, tragedy strikes. Thirty thousand dead. Two unworthy servants die. The ark of God is captured. It seems like the ark maybe wasn't so helpful after all. Where are these brain-storming, religious- icon-confident guys now? What were they thinking? The most sacred symbol of their relationship with God - stolen by the enemy, unable to be kept. Because the most sacred symbols of God's presence with you can't save you. He saves. So don't worry about that little saint on your dashboard or that chain around your neck. Those won't help. There is a God. He's Almighty. But you've got to know Him.

Well we're going to follow the bouncing ark for the next few weeks. It's going to appear to never go back to Shiloh. I'm mentioning that to you now. You can look that up for yourself. There's a prophecy in Jeremiah 7 which says, "Go to my place at Shiloh, where I first put My name, and see what I have done there because of the wickedness of My people. And because you have done these works, and I spoke to you, rising up early and speaking, and you didn't listen, and I've called you, and you haven't heard, therefore I will do to the house which is called by My name, in which you trust, in this place which I send you, I will do to you as I've done to Shiloh." So it does appear like God put an end to this place of worship at Shiloh because that was where their confidence was. So that's the best we have - Jeremiah 7:12-14.

Verse 12, "Then a man of Benjamin ran from the battle line the same day, and came to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dirt on his head. Now when he came, there was Eli, sitting on a seat by the wayside watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told it, all the city cried out" (that the ark had been taken). "When Eli heard the noise of the outcry, he said, 'What does the sound of this tumult mean?' And the man came quickly and told Eli. Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes were so dim that he could not see. Then the man said to Eli, 'I am he who came from the battle. And I fled today from the battle line.' And he said, 'What happened, my son?' So the messenger answered and said, 'Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has been a great slaughter among the people. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead; and the ark of God has been captured.' Then it happened, when he made mention of the ark of God, that Eli fell off the seat backward by the side of the gate; and

his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years. Now his daughter-in-law, Phinehas' wife, was with child, due to be delivered; and when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and gave birth, for her labor pains came upon her. And about the time of her death the women who stood by her said to her, 'Do not fear, for you have borne a son.' But she did not answer, nor did she regard it. Then 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.' "

In verse 16, four little words from Eli, his last, "What happened, my son?" In a way, this man was a good man. He was a kind man. He was a godly man. You might remember he had blown up at Hannah when he had misread her tears (when she came in chapter 1). He had submitted to the LORD's judgment when he was told about it, even by Samuel years earlier. He was just a very poor father, spiritually; he never sought to restrain his own kids. He kind of let them go; he knew what was going on. He was a good, weak man. What we need is some good, strong men in Christ. Sad ending to his life, long as it was. And notice that the sadness continued because Phinehas' wife, pregnant and ready to have a child, dies in childbirth without saying another word. It's the nurse who names her son Ichabod. The word means "inglorious" or "glory has departed." Both of them responded, first and foremost, to the ark. "The ark is gone. We've lost." Whether they're viewing the ark just like the people or not, we don't know. But I would say it is a terrible thing to serve a god who can be stolen from you. So if you look at God in that manner, both of them had their problems and issues. So God deals with Eli as He said that He would, and his sons; and they were removed, and there was great loss of life. Having chastised His people's idolatry, their lack of faith and obedience, God now turns to deal with the Philistines' perception of the God of Israel - that He's in this ark, if you will - and the supposed superiority of their god, Dagon, because they'd won the battle.

Chapter 5 begins a seven-month ordeal. I know that because I cheated; I read ahead. And chapter 6:1 says this went on for seven months. The Philistines believed that they had won over Israel. They gave the credit to their powerful god - part fish, part man - Dagon. But Jehovah, God of Israel, would demonstrate to these unbelievers in a way that they could relate to who's the boss, who's the LORD; and that the power of God that Israel had hoped to find, clutching the ark,

the Philistines would see, looking at the ark.....because that's what they could relate to. They were idolaters from the word go.

Verse 1 says this, "Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon. And when the people of Ashdod arose early in the morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the earth before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and set it in its place again. And when they arose early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. The head of Dagon and both the palms of its hands were broken off on the threshold; only Dagon's torso was left of it. Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor any who come into Dagon's house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day." (We're not goin' back in there!) "But the hand of the LORD was heavy on the people of Ashdod, and He ravaged them and struck them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory. And when the men of Ashdod saw how it was, they said, 'The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is harsh toward us and Dagon our god.' " It's almost unbelievable to read. The spoils of victory - the ark - was put into Dagon's temple. He fell over the first day. They thought, "Well, maybe an accident." By the second day, they weren't so sure. Superstition is kind of like a baseball coach who goes to the mound and won't step on the chalk lines. They weren't goin' back in there. "His head's gone, his hands are off. I think we just give it up. It's good." As their god, so the people were powerless over the true God. So God begins to deal with Ashdod and deal with them very severely. We will read in the next chapter about these land rats that could empty a city, bringing into the city bubonic plague - caught by bites and painful swelling of lymph nodes and all. The word "tumors," here in verse 6, is the word "*ophel*," which can easily be translated hemorrhoids. Imagine having malignant hemorrhoidal skin lesions. Well, you get the picture. This is not a good day for these guys. And the wisdom of the Ashdodites is, "Hey, we gotta get rid of this thing because I don't know what's goin' on, but He don't want us here, and He don't want to be here. And he's hurtin' our god." Rather than, "We should probably change gods at this point," they said, "Let's just get rid of Him because He's hurtin' our god. We only have so many of these statues to go around."

To make matters even crazier, verse 8 says, "Therefore they sent and gathered to themselves all the lords of the Philistines," (there were five major cities of the Philistines; you should probably remember them because they will be with us for

chapter after chapter - Gaza and Ashkelon and Ekron and Gath and Ashdod; those five are the main population centers, and the rulers of those cities ran the Philistines; they were the government, if you will, very small; they ran everything) "and said, 'What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?' And they answered, 'Let the ark of the God of Israel be carried away to Gath.' " Well, that's great. Did they not like Gath? "So they carried the ark of the God of Israel away. So it was, after they had carried it away, that the hand of the LORD was against the city with a very great destruction; and He struck the men of the city, both small and great, and tumors broke out on them. Therefore they sent the ark of God to Ekron." ("Yeah, let's do a five-city tour.") (Laughing) "So it was, as the ark of God came to Ekron, that the Ekronites cried out, saying, 'They have brought the ark of the God of Israel to us, to kill us and our people!' " And they sent the thing packin' again. And we're going to read in the next chapter this apparently went to all of the big towns. Crazy people. Misery loves company. I don't know. Does no one get the message? Does no one in this whole scenario say, "Maybe we ought to bow our knee to this God?" I would have thought there'd be some movement to go "Philistines for Jehovah." Somethin'! But I don't read anything. Well, Ekron doesn't want it.

Notice what they say in verses 11 and 12. "God's hand is heavy upon us." Verse 11, "So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines, and said, 'Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it go back to its own place, so that it does not kill us and our people.' For there was a deadly destruction throughout all the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. And the men who did not die were stricken with the tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven." This was not a good time. There was no relief for these guys in dealing with the true God. The cry of these idolaters was heard everywhere. Isn't it interesting how God solves the problem? To the Jews, they thought, "Well, this is an idol, man, it's gonna help us." Thirty thousand die, the chief priest and his sons die as well. His extended family. They lose a mom. I mean, there's just suffering everywhere. And they realize, "This isn't workin'." And their ark is stolen. To the Philistines, "We've got the ark, and everyone's gettin' tumors, and people are dying." They're so nice to each other. "Hey, go to Ekron" and giving 'em directions to Gath. Unbelievable. And so they're learning that their god certainly can't stand before the God of the Jews. They may have seen the God of the Jews invested in this ark or tied those two together. And that's fine because God did meet with His people there. But He's a real God. It's not the wood, it's not the box; it's the LORD behind them. And so the cries are heard everywhere. And so we'll leave them tonight, all

suffering. But next week, we're gonna get Israel's ark back, and we're gonna look at chapter 6 and chapter 7 so you'll need to read two chapters ahead, where Samuel will judge Israel, and we'll get really close to Israel crying out for a king.

Look, a couple of lessons I think we carry away. Number one is your confidence today has to be in the Person of Jesus Christ. It's great to sing and whatever it is that you hang on to, but it isn't the ark or the system or the statue or the prayer or the cross or whatever it is, the amulet, whatever, your saint picture. I grew up Catholic, so we had a lot of that stuff. Not because we weren't tryin'. But unless you have a personal relationship with Jesus, none of that stuff works. Look at the Jews. They had the ark of the covenant! It's a pretty big deal in the Bible. Right? Everything there is associated with God meeting with His people and sin being forgiven and God's presence and the cloud by day and the fire by night. It's all about, "God's here!" They got stuck with the building. I'm glad we're building a new building. We'll have lots more room and have a coffee shop for kids to come after school and hang out and do their homework. And it's gonna be fun. We've been waitin' on the Lord to build this thing. But it's not gonna improve our relationship with God; He's already here. He's already faithful. He's able to do great things. So we'll enjoy His blessings. But, hey, look. It's not the building, it's the Lord. We could meet in a field, it'd be the same God. And to be honest with you, we've sat in almost a field for a long time. (Pastor Jack laughs) So, I think our confidence has to be in a Person, and we should learn, if nothing else, that when we lose track of Him, we can still be pretty religious, but we can suffer tremendously as a result. You know the world has a religion, and they'll tell you how it works and how you should worship and what you should do. God just wants a relationship. That sets you apart from everyone else. You know God personally. He knows your name. He's sent His Spirit to live in your heart. And so to those who are trusting in idols, the word "Ichabod's" a pretty good thing. "God's forsaken us." That's right. Because all you have left is the symbolism. But if we have the Lord, then we don't need all those other things; and if we have them, we'll treat them with the proper, I think, respect. Right? We'll have communion, but we won't fall in love with the bread or the....we know what they represent, but it's God that we worship. So, God help us.

So the narrative is, I think, of these chapters is just that - be careful when your god becomes your idol because your God lives, and He lives to serve and to take care and to love you.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson

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