

## **Putting God in a Box**

1 Sam. 4:1b – 4:22

(preached 4/1/15; Pine Grove BC Wed PM)

### **Introduction**

When I first met Tonya, she was a cheerleader for Union High School.

So naturally, I went to a lot of Union High football games...

And from 1995 (which is the year we started dating) until 2002, Union had some incredible football teams.

In fact, in those 8 years, they played in 5 state championship games.

In those 5 state championship games, they won 4 and only lost one.

But I still remember that one they lost very clearly.

Now, to be fair to the team and the coaching staff, I must say that I was very impressed with the coaching staffs commitment to allow devotionals before every game.

Various youth pastors in Unions would go and open the Bible to the team before each and every game.

However, this year as the playoff began, one of the local youth pastors had preached a message from Exodus 17..

This is the time when Israel was departing from Egypt.

They have already walked through the divided Red Sea...

But one their way to the Promised Land, the Amalekites attack them...

Here's Exodus 17:8..

***<sup>8</sup> Then Amalek came and fought against Israel at Rephidim. <sup>9</sup> So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose men for us and go out, fight against Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." <sup>10</sup> Joshua did as Moses <sup>[i]</sup>told him, <sup>[i]</sup>and fought against Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. <sup>11</sup> So it came about when Moses held his hand up, that Israel prevailed, and when he let his hand <sup>[k]</sup>down, Amalek prevailed. <sup>12</sup> But Moses' hands were heavy. Then they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it; and Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other. Thus his hands were steady until the sun set. <sup>13</sup> So Joshua <sup>[j]</sup>overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.***

So, this youth pastor read that to the football before the game..

And then to inspire them, he brought out a staff that he had made...

And told them that he was going to hold it up every game in the playoffs..

And as long as that staff was in the air, they would win for God would be on their side.

Now, there is so much error in that teaching that I really don't know where to begin...

First, Exodus 17 is not instruction on what we are to do as NT Christians...

But beyond that, it wasn't even instruction for Israel in Exodus 17.

IT was simply a description of what happened.

Nowhere in this text does it say that Israel was instructed to do this.

And on top of that, how can assume that God is not with the other team?

God sides with righteousness and opposes evil.

Doesn't matter what color jersey you wear or what team you pull for?

God defends His people regardless of what team they are apart of.

But I didn't open with this to illustrate bad teaching; it is easy to find these days.

The reason I chose to open with this is that we find a serious problems with many Christians today..

And that is the idea of superstition or good luck charms.

Though that pastor may have been trying to inspire the team, he was giving them an incorrect picture of God.

The presence of God is not in a staff or a rabbit's foot or even a cross around your neck or a picture of Jesus hanging in your house.

You can't confine God to those things.

Yet, that is what that pastor was doing and that is what other believers do at times when we hold on to objects and claim that God is with us in those things.

Unfortunately, the group of youth pastors that year carried that staff to every playoff game...

And they would rotate holding it up behind the bench for the entire game.

And Union won the first one, the second one, the third one, the fourth one...

And the staff was now this magical object.

And every game, the superstition grew.

But guess what?

In the state championship, Union lost.

And you know why?

The other team was better.

Even though that staff was in the air the whole game, they still lost.

And in portraying an inaccurate picture of God, they did a real disservice to those players.

God's presence and power is not in a staff.

God was on both sides of the field in every game.

Because he is omnipresent.

Meaning that HE is everywhere at all times.

And he does as He pleases.

You don't persuade God to help you by carrying an object that you associate with him.

Now, we may want to think that, and many Christians simply think you stick God in your pocket and carry him everywhere.

How offensive that must be to God.

Well, Israel fell into that trap to in the verse that we will look at today in 1 Samuel chapter 4.

They thought that God was their lucky horseshoe, and that He was forced to bring them victory in battle.

However, that is not what happened.

Let's look at chapter 4 in 3 parts...

In the first 10 verses, we are going to examine...

I. A Defeated Nation (1-10)

And in the final 12 verses, we will look at...

II. A Defeated Family (11-22)

Let's begin with a defeated nation....

Look at verse 1-2 with me...

## **I. A Defeated Nation (1-10)**

***4 Thus the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle and camped beside Ebenezer while the Philistines camped in Aphek. <sup>2</sup> The Philistines drew up in battle array to meet Israel. When the battle spread, Israel was <sup>[a]</sup>defeated before the Philistines who killed about four thousand men on the battlefield.***

Let me take a minute to get our minds back in gear for 1 Samuel.

Israel is still in the time of the judges.

The leadership of Moses and Joshua has passed and God has sent judges to rule over Israel.

It has been a dark time in their history as a nation.

Sin and disobedience seem to be the normal behavior of the nation.

But the book of 1 Samuel opened with hope.

For 3 chapters, we have been hearing the story of Samuel, who God is sending to the nation.

He will be the final judge of Israel before they get a king.

He will lead to them out of the darkness that also surrounds the tabernacle, where the people worship God.

The leadership there is also corrupt as we have met Eli and his sons, Hophni and Phineas.

God has issued a judgment against that entire family.

Eli's entire line of priests will be cut off in Israel.

And last week, we saw Samuel maturing into a man and responding to God's call.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus for us a bit.

We will get back to Samuel in a few chapters, but tonight we will watch the end of Eli's time as priest.

And it all begins with the defeat of the Israel in the first 2 verses of chapter...

At the hands of the Philistines...

Now, most of us are familiar with the Philistines as the nation that gave us Goliath...

The giant who David defeated with a slingshot a few stones...

That battle is still ahead in Israel's history.

Now, we simply meet them as Israel's rival neighbor to the west...

(Map)

They were sea faring people who settled along the coast, most likely arriving there from the areas around Greece.

In verse 1, Israel goes out to meet the Philistines in battle and get soundly defeated...

Losing 4,000 men in the process...

Then verse 3...

***<sup>3</sup> When the people came into the camp, the elders of Israel said, “Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us take to ourselves from Shiloh the ark of the covenant of the Lord, that <sup>[b]</sup>it may come among us and deliver us from the power of our enemies.”***

This verse starts off right...

Notice what the elders say about the defeat?

They acknowledged that the Lord was the one responsible for their defeat.

Which shows that they understood that the Lord was also the one responsible for their victories.

But instead of seeing their disobedience as the reason for their defeat and showing repentance...

They turn to their own way of gaining victory against the Philistines....

And decide that if they carry the ark with them into battle, God will have to give them victory.

This is the idea of the good luck charm God.

Now, the ark is not something that we have talked about much.

But here is a picture of it on the outline.

IT was a golden box built to God's specifications.

IT was almost 4 feet long and a little over 2 feet wide and high.

When Israel was on the move, the ark went before them as they walked.

When they built the tabernacle that they had now, the ark sat in the holiest of holy places behind the veil in the tabernacle...

The ark was the place where atonement was made once a year to cover Israel's sins against the Lord.

The ark was the box that held the tablets that contained the 10 Commandments.

The ark was a representation of God's presence with Israel.

It symbolized God's presence with Israel.

It symbolized his Holiness, it was kept hidden in the tabernacle.

IT symbolized his mercy as offerings were placed upon it.

IT symbolized his law as the commandments were kept in it.

IT symbolized his closeness as Moses would go to the ark to hear from God.

But that was just it.

It was a symbol or representation of God.

But God cannot be contained inside a golden box.

And beyond that, it was not a way of carrying God with them to fight the Philistines.

God was with them when they were defeated the first time.

In fact, according to the elders God must have been there because he was the one who defeated them.

However, the Israelites decided to “take” God to the next fight by carrying the ark with them.

In their mind, there is no way they could lose if the ark was at the battle.

IT was their lucky four leaf clover.

And how ridiculous is that?

People will hang a cross on their rear view mirror or some other place in their car...

Drive like a maniac and say that as long as that cross is there, they are protected from harm.

I love what Dale Ralph Davis says about this passage,..

“Israel was engaging in a pressure tactic of s.

orts, even trying if it were possible to twist God's arm into giving them victory. This is not faith but superstition. It is what I call a "lucky rabbit foot" view of God. And when the Israelites or even Christians today operate this way, our concern is not to seek God but to control him, not to submit to God but to use him. So we prefer religious magic to spiritual holiness; we are interested in success, not repentance."

And that is just it, it was easier to carry the ark into battle than for Israel to repent of their disobedience and begin obeying God.

Let me take this one step further and say this..

I talked to a friend last week, and his church is doing 40 days of fasting a praying...

And we see this often in our day..

We hear of 48 straight hours of prayer at churches...

These 40 days of purpose...

And look that is all fine and well..

Fasting and praying are fine practices.

But if those churches are doing those things to force God to bless them, they are no different than Israel here.

You know what God wants?

He wants your obedience!

Show me a church where the people are walking in obedience to God...

Engaging in personal Bible reading and prayer...

Loving God and loving others, and I'll show you a blessed congregation...

Even if they never do 40 hour fast or 40 days of prayer...

Or 72 hours of reading straight through the Bible.

God is not honored by ritual or ceremony or religious activities designed to force Him to act.

He is honored by obedience from the heart and genuine love of Him and others.

And Israel should have repented before going into the next battle instead of reaching for the ark.

Verse 4..

***<sup>4</sup> So the people sent to Shiloh, and from there they carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts who sits above the cherubim; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.***

There are those two evil men again.

And when unrighteous men are in charge of God's tabernacle, it is never a good sign for a nation.

Verse 5...

***5 As the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth resounded.***

So they take the ark into battle with them, and as they get ready to go out and meet the Philistines, they offer a shout.

Why?

Possibly, they were trying to repeat the same routine where God caused the walls of Jericho to fall down.

Remember how they marched around Jericho, blew the horn and then shouted and the walls came tumbling down.

Maybe they are trying to conjure up the same magic here.

WE need to be careful about rituals in the church.

IF the Bible doesn't command us to do it, we need to make sure we aren't relying on the past to justify doing it now.

Don't think that just because it worked in the past, that is evidence that it should be done now.

Maybe Israel is trusting in the past more than they are trusting in God.

Verse 6..

***6 When the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, “What does the noise 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. 7 The Philistines were afraid, for they said, “God has come into the camp.” And they said, “Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. 8 Woe to us! Who shall deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who smote the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. 9 Take courage and be men, O Philistines, or you will become slaves to the Hebrews, as they have been slaves to you; therefore, be men and fight.”***

Now, this is a great lesson to us all..

Do you see what is happening here?

The Philistines, who are not a God-fearing nation, have the same view of God as Israel..

The Philistines are frightened because they think that the ark is magic too...

They associate the ark with God’s presence..

They saw the ark and they immediately said..

God has come into the camp, so we are ruined...

Here’s the lesson...

When a believer's view of God is the same as the unbelieving world's view of God, it is never a good sign.

The Philistines believe God is in the ark.

But the sad part is..

Israel also believes God is in the box, and unfortunately, a wrong view of God leads to disaster...

Verse 10..

***10 So the Philistines fought and Israel was [c]defeated, and every man fled to his tent; and the slaughter was very great, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers.***

Why would God allow defeat here?

Why would he allow his name to be dishonored among the Philistines?

Why would he allow his reputation to suffer among the pagan nations?

God is teaching Israel here.

His name is already suffering among the pagan nations.

They already have a low view of Him.

The point and the lesson is for Israel.

God will allow his name to suffer defeat if it will awaken Israel to who He really is.

God doesn't fit in a box like the other false gods of Israel's neighbors.

God will tarnish his own reputation in the world than allow Israel to be in a false relationship with Him.

You can't fix your relationship with God by carrying him with you as a good luck charm.

Repentance was the way to blessing, not trying to claim a blessing from the closeness of the ark.

That's why I don't tell people who are lost to start going to church.

Lost people won't find God by getting close to other Christians in a pew...

Lost people won't find God by getting close to an altar or pulpit.

Lost people find God through repentance and faith in Him.

Now, look I pray that lost people find their way here.

It is certainly good to invite the lost to come here.

I believe that the preaching of God's Word is the way to faith.

But when we see this building as a magical place where blessings come by simply being near it, we make it into an ark of our own.

We bring superstition and magic in here and force God to bless us by our attendance alone.

Israel learned a lesson here the hard way.

Their superstition led to a second defeat and 30,000 Israelites died.

Now let's turn from a defeated nation to...

## **II. A Defeated Family (11-22)**

Verse 11...

***11 And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.***

The primary casualty of the defeat was the loss of the ark of God...

But we also see God's judgment upon Eli's house happened on that battlefield as well.

Eli was the priest of the tabernacle.

His sons were evil men who stole and sinned at the tabernacle, and here, those sons die in battle.

We remember the judgment of God in 1 Samuel 2:34 that Eli's sons would die the same day, and this is exactly what happens.

Even in defeat, God is victorious.

His judgment against these sins of his priests is being carried out through Israel's loss.

Though the Philistines may have been thinking that God was powerless, Israel was reminded that God was powerful.

God was using this defeat to rid his tabernacle of evil.

Samuel was in place to act as leader of Israel.

God was simply using this defeat to remind Israel that he will not tolerate sin among his people and especially among his priests.

God's people and his priests will be holy, even if the nation must suffer defeat to bring about that holiness.

So, Hophni and Phineas die, and the news of Israel's defeat finally reaches the ears of their father...

Verse 12...

*<sup>12</sup> Now a man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day with his clothes torn and <sup>[d]</sup>dust on his head. <sup>13</sup> When he came, behold, Eli was sitting on his seat <sup>[e]</sup>by the road eagerly watching, because his heart was trembling for the ark of God. So the man came to tell it in the city, and all the city cried out. <sup>14</sup> When Eli heard the noise of the outcry, he said, "What does the noise of this commotion mean?" Then the man came hurriedly and told Eli. <sup>15</sup> Now Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes were set so that he could not see. <sup>16</sup> The man said to Eli, "I am the one who came from the battle line. Indeed, I escaped from the battle line today." And he said, "How did things go, my son?" <sup>17</sup> Then the one who brought the news replied, "Israel has fled before the Philistines and there has also been a great slaughter among the people, and your two sons also, Hophni and Phineas, are dead, and the ark of God has been taken." <sup>18</sup> When he mentioned the ark of God, <sup>[f]</sup>Eli fell off the seat backward beside*

***the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for <sup>[g]</sup>he was old and heavy. Thus he judged Israel forty years.***

The news of the defeat reached Eli, and though his sons had died in the battle and many others had been slaughtered...

Eli fell off his seat because the ark had been captured.

The fall backward broke his neck because he was overweight.

Overweight from the fat portions of the sacrifices that he had enjoyed.

God's judgment against the house of Eli is happening here.

You think God is concerned about false teachers and shepherds?

You bet he is.

And now, Eli and his sons are gone to pave way for Samuel to lead Israel out of their cycles of sin.

But the news also reaches Phineas' wife in verse 19...

***<sup>19</sup> Now his daughter-in-law, Phinehas's wife, was pregnant and about to give birth; and when she heard the news that the ark of God was taken and that her father-in-law and her husband had died, she kneeled down and gave birth, for her pains***

*came upon her. <sup>20</sup> And about the time of her death the women who stood by her said to her, “Do not be afraid, for you have given birth to a son.” But she did not answer or pay attention. <sup>21</sup> And she called the boy <sup>[h]</sup>Ichabod, saying, “The glory has departed from Israel,” because the ark of God was taken and because of her father-in-law and her husband. <sup>22</sup> She said, “The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God was taken.”*

We see another death in Eli’s house as his daughter in law dies giving birth to a son.

Before she dies, she names her son Ichabod, which means “no glory” or “where is the glory”..

Which was a reference to the ark of God being captured by the Philistines.

From the Israelites perspective, the glory of God was now gone with the departure of the ark.

It was a sad day in Israel.

The symbol of God’s glory, -the ark of the covenant,- was no longer in Israel.

We certainly feel sorry for Israel in some ways.

But I love what one commentator says about these verses..

“The glory of God had indeed left Israel but they were all backward in their thinking. God’s glory did not depart because the ark had been captured. The ark was captured because God’s glory had already departed.”

And I tend to agree.

Israel’s continued disobedience sin and the sin of the priests had already driven God away.

IT is like the story of the husband and wife who had been married for a few years.

They were riding down the road in the pickup truck one day, and the wife says..

“Sweetheart, we used to sit so close together in this truck when we were dating.”

“We almost looked like one person when we were going down the road.”

“Why don’t we sit that close anymore?”

And the husband looks at her and says, “Well, who moved?”

That is the mistake that Israel making here.

God hasn’t left them; they have left God.

Churches close every week, and I often hear the reason being that God has simply remove his blessing from their church...

But could it be that the church has long since removed its blessing of God?

I'm sure that is true more often than not.

The ark of God is gone from Israel, but the God of the ark had left sooner.

The people moan about the consequences but never consider the actions that led to the consequences.

The good news is that God has not gone for good, and we will see that in the coming chapters.

## **Conclusion**

What should we take with us tonight?

Make sure your view of God is accurate because a wrong view of God is disastrous.

Two groups of people in this passage suffered for their wrong view of God...

Israel thought they could fit God in a box and carry Him as a good luck charm into battle.

And they were destroyed by the Philistines..

Eli and his sons thought God was so distant that he would never notice or judge their sins..

And they were destroyed by God.

God is honored when have a right view of him that comes from His word...

And not from our own imagination of Who we think He is...

And HE is not pleased with ritual or tradition or ceremony when it is accompanied with a sinful and disobedient lifestyle.

God is pleased when His people have a right view of him and obey and worship him from the right kind of heart.

Let us pray.