

## When Religion Replaces Relationship

1 Samuel 4

Faithfulness Under Pressure

By Dave Urbanski

As Pastor Scott took us through the fourth chapter of 1 Samuel on Sunday, one crucial theme kept showing up in relation to the Ark of the Covenant: worshiping and having a relationship with the real living God — as opposed to worshiping the “box” that we often “put God in.”

In chapter 4, the Philistines defeated the Israelites in battle, killing about 4,000 men. Interestingly verse 3 reads, “And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, ‘Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?’” Not “the Philistines defeated us” but “the Lord defeated us.”

Pastor Scott had a simple answer to their question: because the Israelites weren’t obeying God! One can’t expect a blessing from above if one isn’t doing what the Creator has commanded.

Pastor Scott suggested that while chapter 4 doesn’t include any godly people, a wise move is to instead take after Hannah, who appears earlier in 1 Samuel. Hannah knows and serves the Lord, trusts and obeys him, and has an intimate, ongoing relationship with him that’s not about rituals or religion. As a result, Pastor Scott reminded us, Hannah experiences God’s favor. But let us also remember that we as Christians aren’t immune from bad things happening to us. When we come to Christ, not all of our problems go away, and for the rest of our lives there will be challenges. The difference is that God is with us through them.

But as we explored in the previous week’s message, Eli and his sons have been doing a lot of wrong — and the blessing of God is not going to follow them. What happens in chapter 4 are the consequences.

After the Philistines resoundingly defeat them, the Israelites figure that bringing out the Ark of the Covenant is their best bet for success. But that decision lays bare the emptiness of their relationship with God. Pastor Scott said they’re “trusting in the box” rather than the Lord himself — and they think that they can force God’s hand. Wrong! The Israelites know God but don’t obey God, Pastor Scott said, adding that there are many people today just like that. Those who attend church and believe God owes them something. People who reject God’s word and live in disobedience — yet expect God to bless them.

The Philistines, on the other hand, don't know God at all ... but they've heard of him. There is some knowledge about what the Lord has done in the past for the Israelites, such as rescuing them from captivity in Egypt. When they realize the Israelites are wielding the Ark as some kind of supernatural weapon, the Philistines' superstitions take over, as does fear. So they default to their own human strength and decide to fight — and verse 10 says they slaughter the Israelites way worse than the previous battle, as 30,000 foot soldiers of Israel fall. One wonders what may have transpired if the Israelites had been obeying the Lord.

Not only that, but the Philistines capture the Ark, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead — just as Samuel had revealed to him earlier. Upon hearing the news, Eli himself falls down and dies. And then Eli's daughter in law — the wife of Phinehas — dies in childbirth. Her words prior to her death? "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."

Pastor Scott shared that the word "glory" here means weighty or heavy — and that God actually treats us as weighty! But as the Lord gives us such an honor, it's incumbent upon us to obey him, to continually repent and reorient ourselves as we strive to follow him. There's a difference between our salvation experience and our growth as believers. Accepting Christ and believing and trusting in him for entry into heaven is, of course, wonderful and incredibly important. But hopefully afterward we're growing in our trust in Christ every day as we practice obedience and prayer and service and discipleship and love for others.

And let what happens in this chapter of 1 Samuel be a warning. Let us do away with anything we've built up in our minds that takes our eyes off the Lord. Let us never trust in "the box." God lives and operates outside of every box we try to put him in. He will not be confined by our temporal viewpoints or our attempts to define him and even keep him at bay. Rather let us be on board with the Lord's full authority in our lives — and then just do what he asks us to do.