**The Battle Of Aphek**

(God’s Glory, Power, and Honor)

1 Samuel 4:1b-7:1

Key Verse: 6:20a "Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?”

We have studied the birth story of Samuel (1Sa 1-2), and the calling of Samuel. (1Sa 3). Today’s passage is chapters 4-6, which has the story of the fierce battle between Philistine and Israel, and the ark of the covenant. The Philistines defeated the Israelites and captured the ark of God. The glory of God seemed to depart from Israel. But in the midst of defeat and despair, God revealed his power and glory among the Philistines. He revealed his holiness so that people might honor and worship him.

**I. I-CHABOT, “The Glory has departed”** (4:1b-22)

After Moses led Israel for 40 years in the wilderness, Joshua had succeeded the leadership. However, after Joshua, there was no one who took over the leadership. Israel was ruled by Judges. Judges were not the judges at the court, who passed the bar exam. They were ordinary people who proved themselves to be leaders in times of crisis, such as Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah. They were temporary leaders. The stories of Israel follow a consistent pattern: the people were unfaithful to God and He delivers them into the hands of their enemies; the people repent and ask God for mercy, then God sends a leader("judge"); the judge delivers the Israelites from oppression and they prosper, but soon they fall again into unfaithfulness and the cycle is repeated. There were ups and downs. God disciplined Israel using the surrounding nations, especially the Philistines. With a little exaggeration, it seems that, no matter where you turn in the Old Testament, Israel is fighting the Philistines. The Philistines were an ancient people, listed in the records of those who descended from Noah’s son Ham after the time of the flood (Ge 10:14). Abraham and Isaac interacted with the Philistines in Canaan (Ge 21:33-34). During the time of the Exodus, God promised that the land of Israel would include the territory of the Philistines (Ex 23:31). This promise meant that conflicts would have to take place for Israel to displace the Philistines.  
  
During the time of the judges in Israel, the Philistines were often a thorn in Israel’s side. Jephthah, Shamgar, and Samson all fought against the Philistines. The battles between Israel and the Philistines continued in the days of Eli. From the first Hebrew, Abraham, until the deportation of Judah to Babylon, the Philistines were a constant enemy of Israel. The battle of Aphek, recorded in this passage, was one of the seven major battles between Israel and the Philistines. Let’s see what happened in this battle.

Look at 1Sa 4:1b and 2. “Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek.” Ironically, Ebenezer means "stone of help." Maybe the Israelites thought it would be a good sign for them to camp by the "Rock of Help." Certainly, as they soon discovered, they needed all the help they could get!

Then, the battle begins. “The Philistines deployed their forces to meet Israel, and as the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about 4,000 of them on the battle field.” (2) The Israelites were devastated and called the elders’ meeting, a council of war, to discuss this defeat. The first question that came up was “Why did it happen this way?” “Why did the Lord bring the defeat on us today before the Philistines?” (3b) They thought they were fighting with God almighty on their side and yet they had been defeated terribly by these pagan uncircumcised Philistines. What were they going to do about it?

Then someone made a suggestion. “Let us bring the ark of the Lord’s covenant from Shiloh, so that he may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies. (3c) If we want God fighting for us, then let’s get him here.” What a brilliant idea! Probably, the elders remembered the old days when Israel conquered the city of Jericho by following the ark of God. (Jos 6:11) They also remembered when the Israelites crossed the Jordan River led by the ark of the covenant. (Jos 3:6) They regarded the ark of covenant as some sort of good luck charm thinking that the ark would get them out of the mess and bring them their luck.

Now, what is the problem with this approach? For a start, what was wrong with their theology? They understood that the ark of the covenant meant God’s presence. They did not really understand that the ark was just a reminder, a cue, of God’s presence with them. They thought that if God was with them, they would win. In other words, they thought that if the ark was physically present, God would be there too and so everything should be all right. Their understanding of the presence of God or the idea of God with them was very superstitious. They tried to find their own solution to their dilemma.

Now, can I just say that they were not alone in that error. If you were in their shoes, what would you do? Many of us take the same approach when we encounter difficulties in life. When we have a problem, we jump in with the first solution that springs to mind. We don’t stop and take a pause and ask God if he is trying to tell us something. We don’t stop and ask God if he has a suggestion for us. Instead we rely on our own ingenuity. And sometimes we even turn to a superstitious approach just like the Israelites. We think if only we change something in the way we have been acting, everything will be better. Or we try bargaining with God. Or we look for a sign that will point us to the right way to go. Some people even use religious items, a Bible, a cross, or a religious painting of some sort, almost as good luck charms, and go to a Christian fortune teller to hear some encouraging words.

The Israelites actually had an alternative to this approach, but they didn’t even consider it. During this time period, the Israelites had no central government existing and the people were led by Judges. It was a time when “the word of God was rare” (1Sa 3:1) and “everyone did as they saw fit.” (Jdg 21:25) We are reminded of countless laments we hear in our time, more commonly expressed, “Where is God in all of this?”

1Sa 4:1 states, "And Samuel’s word came to all Israel." They have in their midst someone to whom God has revealed himself and who was able to bring them a message straight from God. But they didn’t even think of using him.

If we think about the situation, we’re actually better-off than them. We have the word of God given to us in written form. “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.” (2Ti 3:16) And each of us has our own direct line to God. We can pray anytime, and anywhere. We don’t need to go through an intermediary. We don’t need a Samuel in our midst to bring us God’s words. We can ask God directly for guidance through his Holy Spirit who lives within us. We can ask him to lead us and guide us as we read and meditate on His words. We don’t need to resort to superstitious approaches. We have the Living God, and Living words of God, present within us waiting to lead us and guide us as we ask Him.

This Israelites tried this bright idea of the elders theirs. The priests, the sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas brought the Ark of the Covenant down from Shiloh and the strategy seemed to be working. The Ark was supposed to be placed inside the inner room of the tabernacle known as the most holy place, Holy of Holies. And the ark was viewed only by the high priest with the great reverence only once a year on the day of Atonement. To take the ark of the covenant to the battle field was totally inappropriate and the violation of the law.

When the ark arrived in the camp, everyone cheered. Their confidence to win the battle rose tremendously. As the Israelites’ morale rose to the sky, the Philistines’ fell to the ground. They knew about this God of Israel who defeated the Egyptians. And they were very afraid. The Israelite Elders thought they had done it. This would make all the difference! And so, the fight resumed next morning. What was the consequence? Israel lost again and this time thirty thousand soldiers died! In two days, 34,000 foot soldiers of Israel were killed in the battle of Aphek, which meant at least one man in each family was killed. Probably a father, or a father and a son, or brothers were killed in the battle field. After the battle, the whole Israel was mourning for their loss. What’s worse, the ark of the covenant was captured and the priests, Hophni and Phinehas were killed. When the high Priest, Eli heard about it, he too died. Eli died at the age of 98 after serving Israel for 40 years as a judge and high priest.

Now, it is our question, “Why did God bring such a defeat on Israel? Why did they fail so terribly?” Was it because of Eli and his sons, who were described as scoundrels for they had no regard for the Lord? (2:12) As a matter of fact, it was prophesied that Eli and his sons and all his descendants would be punished by God. (1Sa 2) The wife of Phinehas also died, in childbirth, and on her death bed, names her son, **I-chabod**, which meant no glory, because she said the glory had departed from Israel, for the ark of God had been captured.

Still, it is hard to understand why it had happened this way. If the punishment was only for the priests, why did all the Israelites suffer together? Living in this troubled world, we often ask a question when things go against our expectations and wishes, “Why? Why did it happen this way? Why me?” In the book of Ruth, there was a woman named Naomi who lived in Bethlehem, Judah. Because of the severe famine in the land, together with her husband and two sons, they moved to the country of Moab. Now her husband died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women. After they had lived there about ten years, both of her sons died. Naomi was left without her two son and her husband. She was one of the most miserable women in Israel. She must have felt that she was cursed by God. She cried out to God, “Why did this happen to me? Why? Just say me a word.” But she didn’t hear any word from God. Probably, she exclaimed, “Ichabod, the glory of God had departed from me and my family.”

Have you ever experienced this kind of feeling to exclaim, “Ichabod?” Thinking that we don’t deserve this kind of situation but something better than this, we complain to God, “Ichabod.” There is a book titled “*How good do we have to be? New understanding of guilt and forgiveness*” written by Harold Kushner. In his book he says that God does not stop loving us every time we do something wrong and neither should we stop loving ourselves and each other for being less than perfect. People often feel guilt and shame and they think that they are not good enough. Though we are not perfect, we are good enough. This was the author’s conclusion as a Jewish Rabi. As a Cristian, I agree with him when he said, “We are not perfect but we are good enough.” God’s forgiveness through our Lord Jesus Christ enables us to accept our own flaws and the failings of others. In Jesus Christ, who redeemed us with his precious blood, we are good enough to come to him just as we are even though we are never perfect. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross have assured that our misdeeds have not separated us from the love of God. In the midst of despair and utter discouragement, still God finds us worthy of His love.

In fact, no matter what had happened, the glory of God was always there. It never diminished. This defeat didn’t indicate any lessening of his power or glory. Nor did it indicate that his plans for Israel had ended. His power was just as strong as ever before.

And as we read on, we discover the difference between a real God and a false god.

**II. The Lord Revealed His Glory** (5:1-7:1)

Look at 5:1-2, “After Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Abnezer to Ashdod. Then they carried the ark into Dagon’s temple and set it beside Dagon.” The Philistines thought they had won this great victory because their god was stronger than Israel’s God. That’s the way pagans always think. One of the main reasons for worshipping idols is to get help in times of trouble. So, they took the ark back to Ashdod where they placed it in the temple of their god, Dagon, as a plunder, the trophy of war, perhaps even as an offering to their god.

But the next day when they returned to the temple, what did they find? "There was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD!" (3) Whoops! Quickly they picked Dagon up and put him back on his stand. And the next morning when they came in, it was even worse. Not only Dagon was lying face down before the Ark of the Lord in a position of worship, but also his head and his hands were broken off and lying on the doorstep, as though they had been thrown away.

How could this happen? The Philistines had defeated the Israelites and captured the ark and now the ark or at least the God who lived in the Ark appeared to have destroyed the statue of Dagon. But it did not stop there. Not only was Dagon thrown down, but also strange things began to happen to the people of Ashdod. They experience disasters of various kinds, described here simply as things that terrified them. The people broke out in tumors, boils, painful growths, or some kind of unknown virous, like Corona. It did not take them long to understand what was going on. This is one of those coincidences that people of those days understood. The ark of the Lord had been brought to Ashdod. People had been suffering ever since.

Their superstitious minds led them to a conclusion to get rid of the ark. They shouldn’t have taken the ark of the Lord. Having this sacred object that represents the presence of the God of Israel in their midst, as their captive, was, so to speak, a dangerous thing. So, they sent it off to Gath, where exactly the same things happened. The land of the Philistines, called Philistia, consisted of five major cities: Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron. (6:17) They sent the ark of god of Israel from one city to another to avoid the disaster. People in Gath dumped the ark to another city, Ekron.

Well, now the word had gotten around. The people of Ekron had heard what had happened in Ashdod and Gath so they wanted nothing to do with it. They cried out. "Are you trying to kill us as well? Send it back where it came from." (10) Look at 5:11-12, “So they called together all the rulers of Philistines and said ‘Send the ark of the god of Israel away; let it go back to its own place, or it will kill us and our people.’ For death had filled the city with panic; God’s hand was very heavy on it. Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven.” They, at least, understood the source of the problem and knew what the only solution was. They could not overcome the God of Israel that they could send him back where he belonged.

Now, I want you to notice something here. The Israelites thought that if they brought the Ark with them into battle then God would be with them and they had won. But it didn’t work like that. So, was that because God was not with them? No. What happened when the Ark was taken off to Ashdod, the land of Philistines? God went with it. God had chosen to use the Ark as a symbol of his physical presence. So, when it was moved from city to city, he went with it and the plagues also moved from place to place. So why didn’t the presence of the Ark help the Israelites win their battle? Was it perhaps because the battle was determined by what God wanted to achieve, not just by his being there? That particular battle was the means by which God would bring his judgement on Eli and his sons, so they were going to lose it.

Sometimes we wonder whether God is with us when things go wrong against our wishes. Sometimes we think that maybe God has left us; that we are suffering because he has abandoned us. Maybe we feel guilty about something and think that God has left us because of our wrong-doings, and mistakes. But the fact that things go wrong doesn’t mean that God isn’t there. There may be all sorts of reasons why God allows things to happen, that we’re not even vaguely aware of.

Let me ask you another question. Why are you a worshipper of God, if that’s what you are? I think that’s a very good question for us to ask ourselves every once in a while. Are we in the worship for what we get out of it? The Philistines worshipped their god Dagon because they thought he would bring them victory or wealth and prosperity. The Canaanites worshipped Baal and Asherah because they brought fertility to the soil. Certainly, some of the Israelites thought it was good to have God on their side because he had brought them victory. But what about us? Do we worship God for the reward of heaven? Do we worship him because we know he’ll look after us when we’re in trouble? Do we worship him because we hope he’ll give us prosperity? That’s certainly popular message of some of the Christian Church. Or do we worship him simply because he is the true and living God: When God speaks, the things he says happen, and when God is present, all other gods fall down before him?

We see there are lots of gods in this world. There are the gods of other religions. There are the gods of politics and the gods of commerce and economics. Here in America, I think we are well acquainted with the god of success and prosperity, the goddess of pleasure and self-indulgence. But none of these are truly God. None of these can be relied upon to do, what they promise, the way our God can.

Nowadays, people experience that one unknown virus may destroy everything. They used to worry about computer viruses, but now, it is an irony that they worry about unknown and incurable biological virus. After the attack of the coronavirus, it impacted world economy seriously and people began to worry. Did you hear the news yesterday? Mr. Trump became furiously mad at the news that 14 Americans, who tested positive, were brought back to the U.S. from Japan. They were aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship, where the coronavirus spread. Mr. Trump was enraged that they were allowed to come to the U.S. without his permission. The title of the article says, *“White House fears coronavirus could shape Trump’s 2020 fortunes.”* The Trump administration is bracing for a possible coronavirus outbreak in the United States, sickening thousands and threatening an economic slowdown in the heat of President Donald Trump’s reelection campaign. They are concerned that the coronavirus is already spreading undetected within U.S borders. People in China, S. Korea, and Japan are devasted by the coronavirus. Out of fear, people are cancelling their plan to visit their relatives in their mother country. They want to cancel their upcoming Asian cruise out of concern over the coronavirus but it was announced that there was no refund. There is currently no vaccine to prevent the coronavirus. May God have mercy upon us!

When the ark of God was captured by the Philistines what happened. They discovered what a powerful God He really was. The idol they had been worshiping fell down before him. Then he broke off its arms and head. He caused the people to suffer terrible diseases and even to die. And there’s nothing they could do about it. Finally, they came back to their senses and decided to send the ark back to the Israelites where he belonged.

God is not someone whom we can control or manipulate. He will not do something simply because we desire it to happen. Instead, he will do what he promised. As we continue on this study of the book of Samuel, we will see that God had great plans for Israel. He’ll establish them in the land as he promised to Abraham and to Moses. He will show himself to be one true and living God and he is the ultimate King of the kings by the way he leads his people.

As a conclusion: We can rely on God to do what he has promised. It is good to believe that God offers us the rewards of heaven, the hope of resurrection, and eternal life. God promises to be with us and to lead us in all we do and wherever we are. That’s a sign of his love and grace towards those He loves. However, the reason we worship him is not because of the rewards He promised. It’s not because of what he might do for us. It is first and foremost because he is the one true and living God. We worship him because every knee in heaven and on earth will bow down and every tongue confess that Christ is the Lord to the glory of God the Father.

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
    and gave him the name that is above every name,  
**10**that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
    in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
**11**and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
    to the glory of God the Father.” (Php 2:9-11)

Let’s read 6:20a, "Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?”