

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian  
Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic.,  
3166]

**DHW BIBLE CLASS**

**LESSON 4A**

**FIRST SAMUEL**

**CHAPTER 4**

**INTRODUCTION**

God's people are not exempted from His punishment. Proverb 11:31 clearly states, "Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and the sinner." They will be judged very severely as they have received much from the LORD. Israel was in one of her darkest periods in history. It was the tail end of the period of Judges, where every man did what was right in his own eyes. They forsook the law of God. This departure from the faith began from the very top, the priestly office. They will now pay the ultimate price for their sins and disobedience.

In this study, Israel suffered a great defeat by the Philistines. The capture of the ark of the Covenant by the Philistines spelt disaster for them. God showed His great power and sovereignty. The LORD fulfilled His judgment upon Eli, the high priest, and his two sons.

Superstition was a fruit of idolatry and waywardness that

ensnared the priests in young Samuel's days. They lost their first battle and thought that the power and strength of God was in the ark of the Covenant itself. They brought the ark to the battle field sincerely believing that they will now have the power to defeat the Philistines. But they lost the ark and their lives as well.

The sin of idolatry does not stop with merely bowing down to some objects of stone, or precious metal. The fruits of idolatry are ominous and life enslaving which was the case in 1 Samuel 4.

**COMMENTARY**

**Israel Fought With the Philistines  
— 4:1-2**

Israel's relationship with the Philistines, her neighbour in the west, was strained. The Philistines lived in the south western coastal plain of the land. Five of their major cities are mentioned in the book (1 Samuel 6:17) namely, Ashdod, Gaza, Askelon, Gath and Ekron. The Philistines were non-semitic for they were Indo-Europeans who had migrated from the Aegean Islands and Asia Minor as early as 1200 B.C. They were an aggressive race and posed the greatest threat to the security of Israel. Israel could have routed them in the days of Joshua but instead, they kept them as their slaves. They will now pay the price

for their sins. The Philistines became a thorn to Israel.

The Israelites and the Philistines were on the verge of a battle. No reason was given. The text suggested that Israel was the aggressor. The Israelites pitched their military camp at Ebenezer (meaning, “stone of help”), and the Philistines at Aphek. The battle resulted in the defeat of Israel. Israel suffered heavy casualties -- they lost 4,000 men.

**Israelites Used the Ark of  
the Covenant of God  
Superstitiously — 4:3-5**

From the human stand-point, the Philistines won the battle because of their superior army. However, Israel had won many battles in the past when God fought with them and for them. But in this battle, Israel lost badly. Thus, they asked: “Why has the LORD smitten us today before the Philistines?” (4:3) This was the right question but instead of doing some soul searching and repenting of their sins, they pointed their fingers at God. God was not with them nor for them!

They fetched “the ark of the covenant of the LORD” from Shiloh and brought it to the battlefield. They thought that “the ark of the covenant of the LORD” would ensure victory over the Philistines in the next battle. The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, accompanied the transfer of “the ark of the covenant of God” to the battlefield. This was a sinful act

especially on the part of Hophni and Phinehas. God had never given anyone, not even the high priest, the right to take the ark of the Covenant out of the Holiest Place. It was to remain inside the sacred room.

But the sons of Eli were not spiritual men. They were superstitious and ignorant. The arrival of “the ark of the covenant of God” was received with a great shout of exhilaration that was even heard in the Philistines’ camp. Were the people of Israel sincere in their confidence that this time victory will surely be theirs? Definitely! Their great shout was deafening and probably instilled some degree of confidence into the hearts and minds of the Israelites.

But the Israelites failed to understand that “the ark of the covenant of the LORD” was just a symbol of the presence of God. It was not God Himself! The transfer of the “ark of the covenant of LORD” was not sanctioned by the LORD.<sup>1</sup> The Israelites’ act was idolatrous because they honoured the symbol rather than the LORD. They had turned their backs on the LORD,

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<sup>1</sup> Compare: Joshua 6:3 And ye shall compass the city, all ye men of war, *and* go round about the city once. Thus shalt thou do six days. 4 And seven priests shall bear before the ark seven trumpets of rams’ horns: and the seventh day ye shall compass the city seven times, and the priests shall blow with the trumpets.

disobeyed Him and worshipped idols.<sup>2</sup>

#### **The Philistines' Reaction – 4:6-9**

The Philistines' reaction was one of fear at first. They had heard about how the God of Israel had delivered the Israelites from the powerful Egyptians using the plagues. They said in 1 Samuel 4:7-8, “. . . , *Woe unto us! for there hath not been such a thing heretofore. Woe unto us! who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty Gods? these are the Gods that smote the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness.*”

The Philistines equated God with the ark of the LORD. The God of Israel will now fight for Israel the way He fought against the Egyptians with the ten plagues. Although hundreds of years have passed, yet the deeds of the LORD in destroying Egypt in Moses' days continued to instill fear in the hearts of the enemies of Israel. If only this were true of the people of Israel. But sadly this was not the case.

But the Philistines overcame their fear. 1 Samuel 4:9 says, *“Be strong, and quit yourselves like men, O ye Philistines, that ye be not servants unto the Hebrews, as they have been to you: quit yourselves like*

*men, and fight.”* The Philistines leader commanded his men not to be afraid. The motivating factor was fear of slavery. If you lose the battle to the Israelites, you will become their slaves. Do you want that to happen? That spurred the Philistines on to overcome their fear!

They were commanded twice to “quit themselves like men” which means to be men. Do not be afraid of the Israelites and their gods.

#### **Israel was Defeated a Second Time – 4:10-11**

The Israelites and the Philistines engaged in battle a second time. The result was a decisive victory for the Philistines – 30,000 Israelite soldiers were slaughtered! The remaining Israelites fled into their own tents. They ran back home with their tails between their legs.

The Philistines even captured the “the ark of God”. Hophni and Phinehas were slain -- God had delivered His judgment on them for their sins. This was a most humiliating defeat for Israel.

The people in those days believe that when they fight, their gods as represented by their objects of worship would fight for them. When Israel lost the battle, it was the gods of Israel who had lost. The Philistines also believed that it was the greatness of their gods that gave them the victory over Israel and that their gods were more powerful than the gods of Israel.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Samuel 7:3 And Samuel spake unto all the house of Israel, saying, If ye do return unto the LORD with all your hearts, *then* put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the LORD, and serve him only: and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.

### **The Effect of Israel's Defeat at Shiloh – 4:12-18**

A terribly shaken messenger (from the tribe of Benjamin), with torn clothes and head covered with dust, ran to Shiloh to break the news of Israel's defeat and the loss of the ark of God. The description of the "runner" with his dishevelled attire indicates that he ran in fear and great haste. When the sad news was relayed, all the people in the city cried (a general call for help) out loudly. When the runner came, Eli was seated by the road side. This shows that Eli was restless and anxiously awaiting for news from the battlefield. The high priest should have been in The Tabernacle area. Eli was fearful that the ark of the Covenant might be lost and taken captive. The people were told of Israel's defeat and the deaths of Hophni and Phinehas.

Eli had heard the cry (a shrieking loud cry of torment, cf. Exo. 3:7, 9; 11:6) but as he was 98 years old and blind, he could not go to the city to find out what was wrong. The messenger came to him. When it was reported that his two sons were slain, Eli appeared resigned to their fate. He had been told by the LORD that his sons would be destroyed and would not die a natural death as a sign of the LORD's judgment. This prophecy came to pass.

But when he was told that the ark of the covenant of the LORD was taken away by the Philistines, Eli fell

off from his seat. Eli was old and fat. He fell backwards. The fall broke his neck and he died. He had judged Israel for 40 years.

The fact that Eli reacted more violently to the report about the ark of God indicated that he was not in favour of moving the ark from The Tabernacle in Shiloh. He seemed to be more concerned for the glory of God being lost than the deaths of his two sons.

### **Ichabod: the Glory of God has Departed – 4:19-22**

Eli's daughter-in-law, wife of Phinehas, was heavy with child. The news that the ark of God was captured and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead shocked her. She went into labour suddenly and gave birth to a son. She was very weak but before she died, she named the child "Ichabod" (literally means: 'no glory') -- the "glory of the LORD is departed from Israel." 1 Samuel 4:21 states, "*And she named the child Ichabod, saying, The glory is departed from Israel: because the ark of God was taken, and because of her father in law and her husband were dead*".

She measured the departure of the glory of God as the loss of the ark of God and the deaths of the high priest and her husband, who was supposed to be the succeeding high priest. This was repeated in 4:22 although this second mention

did not include the deaths of Eli and Phinehas.

### **PRACTICAL VALUE**

The children of Israel were right in thinking that they had lost the battle with the Philistines because the LORD was not with them. They were wrong in transferring the ark of the LORD into their camp. Their act was a superstitious use of the ark of God. The real reason for their defeat was their unconfessed sins.

Christians with unconfessed sins will similarly suffer a lack of spiritual power in their lives. Many, like the Israelites, chose to use “sacred” objects of the faith such as the cross, holy water and even the Bible to bring about desired results.

Israel had everything going for her as a nation of God’s people. But the Israelites forfeited everything because of sin. The sin came from the very top, the most holy people in Israel, the high priest and priests. This resulted in the deaths of thousands of Israelites. They were led astray by these evil priests.

Eli knew that what his sons did was wrong when they took the ark of God out of the Holiest place and brought it to the battle field. God is omnipresent. He is not like the gods of the heathens, which were limited by space and time. But idolatrous Israel had become like the heathens. The gross sin of the priests which

resulted in their limitation of God, cost them their lives and the lives of thousands. Leaders who are derelict in their duties will destroy the members of the congregation under their care. They will lead them into committing the same sin that they have committed. The consequence would be the same sad destruction. AMEN.

**DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**Daily Readings**

**Monday:** 1 Samuel 4:1-9; Deuteronomy 28:15, 25.

**Tuesday:** 1 Samuel 4:10-11.

**Wednesday:** 1 Samuel 4:12-14.

**Thursday:** 1 Samuel 4:15-18.

**Friday:** 1 Samuel 4:19-22.

**Analysis**

Text	Practical Value
1 Samuel 4:1-11	
1 Samuel 4:12-22	

**Discussion Questions**

1. What was the real cause of Israel's defeat to the Philistines?

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2. What is the true significance of the ark of God? Why did it not have the power to defeat the Philistines when it had the power to kill anyone who touched it?

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3. What should Eli have done that could have prevented the loss of the ark of God?

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4. Did Phinehas' wife define the departure of the glory of God correctly as the departure of the ark of God and the deaths of the high priest and his sons?

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5. What are some modern day examples of Christians committing the same kind of sin committed by Phinehas and Hophni?

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