

Boxed-Up Theology

I Samuel 4:1-22

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

Now turn with me if you would to I Samuel 4. In our studies which we began a few weeks ago in the First Book of Samuel, we come tonight to a very solemn passage. I can't help but think before I read this passage how contrasting it surely is to the passage we were looking at this morning. This morning we were in grace and the overtures of the gospel: tonight we see the consequences of refusing the gospel. What is there outside the gospel? What is there outside of grace? Well, pay attention to the passage and we'll see all too clearly what it is.

Let's look to God in prayer.

Father, we thank You for the Scriptures. We pray now for Your blessing. Help us as we read it together to understand that which You are saying to us. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is God's word:

And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.

Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. And when the troops came to 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 here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.' So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

As soon as the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, 'What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?' And when they learned that the ark of the Lord had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid,

for they said, "A god has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness. Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight."

So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head. When he arrived, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out. When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, "What is this uproar?" Then the man hurried and came and told Eli. Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set so that he could not see. And the man said to Eli, "I am he who has come from the battle; I fled from the battle today." And he said, "How did it go, my son?" He who brought the news answered and said, "Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a great defeat among the people. Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured." As soon as he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years.

Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. 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 and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. And about the time of her death the women attending her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son." But she did not answer or pay attention. And 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."

May God bless to us that reading of His holy word.

You notice how this chapter begins: "The word of Samuel came to all Israel"...and then as you'll see in the next three chapters, we don't hear a word from Samuel. And that is probably to indicate that although Samuel had been preaching this whole time, Israel had not been listening. And before God can do what He intends to do, and to do it through the instrumentality of this great

prophet, Samuel, He must first of all remove the old guard — Eli and his two sons.

This passage is all about superstition. It's about a box — a box about the size of a chest that some of you have at the bottom of your bed in which you keep linens...maybe handed down to you from your parents or grandparents, or whatever. We have one at the bottom of our bed.

It was about that size, maybe a little bit bigger, covered in gold, on top of which were two cherubs with their wings outstretched. You never saw this box. It was in the temple in Shiloh. It had been carried through the wilderness, but now was in the temple in Shiloh and it was hidden from view by a curtain. Only the high priest would ever see this box. It was called *the ark of the covenant*. The top of it was called *the mercy seat*, because on the top of this box would be sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice to atone for sin.

But tonight we're going to see superstition at work, because there is a war. Israel is at war with the Philistines. The Philistines occupy the land to the west and somewhat to the south towards the coast from Shiloh. The Philistines are encamped in a place called Aphek, 22 miles from Shiloh (imagine Edwards from Jackson), and the Israelites are in another place nearby called Ebenezer. And there's a battle, and it doesn't go well. Four thousand Israelites, Hebrew men, are killed. And then someone has this bright idea: Let's take the box, let's take the ark of the covenant. Let's take the ark of the covenant that is symbolic of the presence of God. Let's take it into battle with us.

And it doesn't go well, because now thirty thousand Hebrew men are killed and the ark is taken by the Philistines. It's a tragic chapter, and I want us to learn three things...if I have time! it's already ten to seven...let's see how far we can get.

I. God will suffer defeat rather than let you think that you own Him

First of all, God will suffer defeat rather than let you think that you own Him. He'd rather suffer defeat than to let you think that you own Him. It's amazing how many people who know that they have a problem but they don't know what the solution to that problem is — they have a God-shaped void in their hearts, and they think the solution is religion. They turn to religion. They look to religion to get them out of trouble. They're even prepared to face death, with religion. 'We'll get the ark, and it will save us.' They'll go to mass...they'll go to Easter service at First Presbyterian Church. They'll invoke the minister when they are threatened with cancer. Politicians will invoke religion if it gets them some more votes. Do you know that the Nazis had inscribed on their belts, *Gott Mit Uns?* "God is with us," inscribed on their belts. God is with us. Both sides in the Civil War invoked God, Southerners and Northerners. I'm telling you tonight that many will go

before the Judgment Seat of God, and they'll say, 'Lord, we carried the ark into battle with us. We carried the ark. We went to church. We said our prayers. We gave money to this organization, and that church.' And God will say, "Depart from Me, I never knew you."

I'm saying there's a lesson here that God will suffer defeat rather than let you think that you own Him, that you can manipulate Him, that you can use Him like you use a rabbit's foot. [I trust you don't use rabbits' feet here at First Presbyterian Church, but you know what I mean! A lucky charm, something to invoke simply because you're in trouble.] My dear friends, there are hundreds of thousands of people, millions of people, who do just that. Just like the Israelites here, they were in trouble; they were in desperate trouble, so they thought to themselves, 'Let's bring God into this. Let's bring the box into this'...led by two of the worst charlatans you could ever imagine, Hophni and Phinehas.

Do you remember what we were looking at this morning in Psalm 40? "Sacrifices and offerings I do not desire." Because unless your heart is right, it's just superstition. Unless your heart is right...unless you have a relationship with Jesus Christ, it's all just superstition.

II. God fulfills His word even in what looks to us like disaster.

There's a second lesson here, that God fulfills His word even in what looks to us like disaster. You see, there's an extraordinary thing in this passage. From the perspective of the Hebrews, from the perspective of Eli, from the perspective of the folks back in Shiloh, this was an unmitigated disaster. Thirty-four thousand people had been killed. That's a lot of people. That's a tremendous lot. Thirty thousand in one day, slaughtered on the field of battle. My dear friends, it was not a pretty sight.

But, you know, from the perspective of God, He was actually fulfilling His word. Do you remember? An unnamed prophet had come to Eli back in I Samuel 2 at the time when Samuel was growing up in the temple. Do you remember what that prophet said to Eli? That he would see his two sons killed on the same day. It was a judgment of God. These two sons, Hophni and Phinehas — you remember their lifestyle, how they cavorted with female servants in the temple, how they manipulated the sacrifices in order to get the best cuts of meat for themselves, how they threatened with bullying tactics sincere worshipers who came to the temple in Shiloh. What do you think God cares about the most, the fact that the Philistines have this box or the fact that His people are not giving Him honor? Which do you think God cares about the most, the fact that this box was in the hands of the Philistines or the fact that His people in their hearts were not honoring Him?

So Hophni and Phinehas are dead. Eli's two prodigal sons, they're dead. God is

not mocked. What a man sows, he will reap. If you sow corruption, you will reap corruption. If you say no to grace, what are you going to reap? Judgment. The fires of damnation. That's what you will reap. Yes, Reverend Hophni and Reverend Phinehas, priestly servants in the temple in Shiloh with a genealogy some of you would die for: sons of Levi; sons of Aaron. Now, that is some genealogy! They could trace their lineage all the way back to Aaron. Ministering in the First Church of Shiloh...actually, the First Church of the whole land. But God had written in His word, they will fall and die in their sin. God had spoken. God had given His word. And His word came true.

Do you see that? Does God say there is a heaven for those who love Jesus Christ? Does God say that there is an eternity of blessedness and joy for those who lean on Jesus only for their salvation? Does God say that for those who reject the gospel and for those who say no to Jesus Christ, there is only a fearful waiting for a judgment? Does God say that in His word? Yes, He does. Yes, He does, and God's word doesn't change. God's word cannot be broken. His word always comes true - His promise and His threat. His blessing and His curse.

Where are you tonight, my friend? Where are you tonight? Are you on the side of God's blessing? Are you building your life on the solid rock of Jesus Christ? Are you living your lives endeavoring by way of gratitude to give yourselves entirely to the Lord because God has renewed your heart? Or are you engaging in superstitious religion that is empty and that will always fail you, and in the end will catastrophically fail you on the Day of Judgment?

III. Christ will remove those who do not abide in His word.

But there's a third lesson here. It's a very solemn lesson. I want you to pay attention to it for a few minutes. It's the lesson that we learn from Phinehas' wife. Eli is now dead. He has a weak heart. He's 98, after all. He hears the news of his two sons, and he falls over backwards and snaps his neck and he's dead. He's been a priest for forty years. Now, we criticized him for the way he's reared his children perhaps, but you know there was some godliness in Eli, too. You remember how he had said to Samuel, 'Don't hold anything back. Whatever God has said to you, don't hold it back'...even to the point that the word had been given that his two sons would be killed.

But now Phinehas' wife...she's pregnant. She hears the news of Eli's death and her husband's death, and she goes into labor. And before she dies, she names her son Ichabod. Do you know what *Ichabod* means? "The glory has departed." [You understand *glory* in the Old Testament is synonymous with God himself. God is the glory.] Because when the ark of the covenant had been taken, as far as she was concerned, God had departed out of Shiloh. When they had decided, you see, to use God superstitiously and the ark was in the hands of the Philistines, He was no longer in Shiloh. Under the old covenant God was present

in Shiloh, as later He would be present in the temple in Jerusalem. But He's not there anymore. He's gone. There's a solemn passage in Ezekiel 10 — you can study it later — where Ezekiel prophesies the glory of God departing from the temple in Jerusalem. And you say, “Well, that's just Old Testament stuff”...until you go to the letters in Revelation 2 and 3, the letters to the churches in the apocalypse of John. And you remember the warning, the threat that Christ will remove the lampstands from certain churches that do not abide in His word.
Ichabod.

I remember walking around a church in New England a couple of years ago, reading something about its extraordinary history in the early Puritan period in New England, how that pulpit had been occupied by men who loved the word of God and preached it faithfully. And now it was a bastion for liberalism and gay rights, and women's rights, and all kinds of other things. I remember thinking as I was reading it that *Ichabod* was written all over this place. God had departed.

Now, my friends, the question I want you to think about tonight before you go home on this Lord's Day: do you think that could happen to First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi? This great church, wonderful church that we love so much? Do you think it could happen to First Presbyterian Church? That *Ichabod* could be written over the doorposts? That it becomes just an empty shell? My dear friends, I could take you not just to one or two, I could take you to hundreds of churches in this land tonight where once the gospel was preached, but it's not preached there anymore. Another gospel is being preached there now, and *Ichabod* is written all over them.

Elders, let me give you this charge tonight: that you do all in your power, whatever that means and whatever it takes, to ensure that *Ichabod* is never written over the doorposts of this church; that the gospel is always preached here; that the word of God is always believed here; that Christ is always exalted here; and that this story dog us all the days of our life to that end.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for the Scriptures, solemn as this passage is. We pray tonight for Your blessing, because unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain that build it. Grant to us Your tender mercies, we pray, and Your persevering grace. Rebuke us if we need it. Draw us again and again and again to the foot of the cross and to Jesus Christ, for it is in Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.

Please stand; receive the Lord's benediction.

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