

1 Samuel 4

The Glory Departs

People of God, 1 Samuel 4 is a powerful story that reminds us of the severity of the promises of God in the third commandment – God will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.

The Philistines have come out to battle against Israel at a place called Aphek. The occasion for the battle is unknown, but it might have something to do with Samson who has been causing a few problems for the Philistines. Israel assembled their army at Ebenezer, which is ironic, since Ebenezer means “Rock of Help.” But Israel received no help because they did not put their trust in Yahweh who alone is the Rock. Israel did not come prepared for battle because they had not worshiped Yahweh first, and trusted in Him to be their Helper.

The battle spread, and Israel was quickly defeated. And notice how the elders of Israel asked the question of why they lost – “*Why has Yahweh defeated us today against the Philistines?*” Which is exactly the way the question ought to be formulated. It is Yahweh who has defeated them in battle. The Philistines were just the mere instrument Yahweh used to defeat them.

So they said “*let us take the Ark of the Covenant of Yahweh here from Shiloh, that **it** may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.*”

The ark of the covenant was the symbol of the presence of Yahweh. It had housed in it the 10 commandments, Aaron's staff that budded, and a jar of manna. With the Cherubim flanked on either side of it with their wings outspread over it, it symbolized the presence of Yahweh with His people.

It was also reckoned as His footstool. In military imagery, the footstool is the place where your defeated enemies are put. So the ark was brought out to battle symbolizing the military victory of Israel – God was going to fight for them, and subdue his enemies, and put them under His feet, indicated by His footstool, the ark of the covenant being brought out.

But there is one problem – the people who attended the ark of the covenant were Hophni and Phineas – the two wicked sons of Eli who has blasphemed Yahweh and broke His covenant. You cannot take the ark of the COVENANT of Yahweh and expect God to fight on behalf of those who broke His Covenant and blasphemed the name of the Lord of the Covenant.

But the elders of Israel said, *Let us bring the ark so it might save us from our enemies!* But who is going to save you when you have made Yahweh your enemy?

Once the ark was brought out it inspired much hope in the army of Israel and they gave a mighty shout. The Philistines heard the shout and were afraid, for they realized that Israel's God had come into the camp. And they said *"Woe to us! Who can deliver us from these mighty gods. These are the same gods who struck down the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness."*

The Philistines interpreted Israelite religion from their own polytheistic lens, and they blended the events of the Exodus and the wilderness wandering together. Either way they heard something of the stories from three hundred something years prior. They knew of the power of the God of Israel.

But when the Philistines make reference to *"the gods who struck down the Egyptians,"* this is also a jab at Israel who had been worshiping other gods throughout the time of the judges, and how they often would attribute the redemption that happened at Egypt with these other gods.

So the Philistines have to muster courage, and they say, *"Take courage and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been slaves to you; be men and fight."*

The Hebrews are enslaved to the Philistines, echoing their bondage in Egypt. Genesis 10 even links the Philistines to

the Egyptians: “Egypt fathered... Casluhim (from whom the Philistines come).” Thus, another Exodus is coming.

So the Philistines fought, Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his home, the two sons of Eli – Hophni and Phineas were killed, as was foretold by the Word of the LORD by the Man of God and by Samuel. And the Ark of God was taken.

In Numbers 10, as Israel wandered through the wilderness, they carried the ark of the covenant, following the glory cloud of God. When the cloud lifted, Moses would declare, “Arise, O LORD, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you.” When the cloud rested and the ark halted, he would cry out, “Return, O LORD, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel.”

This scene portrays the LORD as a divine warrior, rising to scatter His enemies. But in 1 Samuel, a tragic reversal unfolds. Instead of victory, we read, “The Philistines fought, Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home.” God had indeed risen to battle—but this time, Israel’s hardened hearts and pagan view of God blinded them to a sobering truth: they had become His enemies. The LORD sent them fleeing, just as He had scattered His foes in the wilderness.

So the man from Benjamin fled from the battle line with ashes on his head in defeat and he tells everyone what happened. Eli is there, blind, sitting in his chair waiting for the news. The man tells Eli everything.

“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.” ¹⁸ 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 Eli broke his neck because, well, he didn't have much of a spine to begin with.

But we are also told that Eli broke his neck because Eli was heavy—a word that shares its root with the word for *glory*. Glory in Scripture is described as weighty. As a priest, Eli was called to bear the glory of Yahweh, reflecting God's holiness and honor. But instead of faithfully stewarding this weight of glory, Eli misused it. He grew heavy, not with the weight of God's glory upon his soul, but with physical fatness born of indulgence and disregard for God's commands. Eli and his sons dishonored the offerings of Yahweh, treating His name lightly while glorifying themselves.

This misuse of glory echoes God's judgment upon the Egyptians. Just as the wheels of Pharaoh's chariots drove **heavily** in the mud of the Red Sea, weighed down by God's glory as He destroyed them, so too Eli's own weight became a symbol of divine judgment. When God's glory arose in battle and the ark was captured, Eli, fat and weighty with misplaced glory, fell to his death. In the end, the very weight of God's glory—the glory Eli failed to honor—crushed him, just as it did Pharaoh's army, and just as it will the gods of the Philistines.

Eli's daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant at this time. When she heard the devastating news that the ark of God had been taken and that both her husband and Eli were dead, the shock sent her into labor. She gave birth to a son, and she named him Ichabod—*I-chavod*. In Hebrew, *chavod* means “glory,” and *I-* is a negation. Thus, the name Ichabod means “no glory.” She declared, “*The glory has departed from Israel,*” *because the ark of God had been taken.*”

The ESV gives us an alternate reading of this phrase. Instead of saying the glory has departed, it says, *the glory has gone into exile*. And there is another connection with the word translated captured, or taken, here. Israel wanted to

take the Ark of the Covenant into battle, and as a result it was taken into exile.

The word for “has departed” or “has gone into exile” is also related to the word “revealed” and even shares the idea of “removed.” Such that if you remove a covering, what lies underneath is revealed.

God reveals his glory by allowing it to be removed. Or to say it the other way, God has removed His glory and so reveals it against His enemies.

It is a revealing by negation. God’s glory is revealed when Israel no longer has it. Israel took the glory of God for granted, they treated Yahweh like an idol that can be manipulated to serve their will, with no regard to their own sins and blasphemies. And so the revelation of God’s glory was made known to them when his glory was removed and taken into exile.

Similarly, as the ark of God was taken into exile, revealing God’s glory through its removal, so too was Christ taken into exile on the cross. The crucifixion appeared to be the ultimate removal of God’s glory—a moment of abandonment and defeat.

On the cross Christ cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" signaling that the weight of glory

against the sin of the world had fully fallen upon Him. In that moment, it seemed as though the glory of God had been removed from Jesus, and from the world as the sky turned black, the earth quaked, and the veil in the temple was torn.

Yet, paradoxically, this removal of the glory of God in Christ on the cross, is the greatest revelation of the glory of God in Christ. On the cross, the justice, mercy, wrath, and love of God were displayed in their fullness. The judgment that Israel faced through the ark's exile finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, who bore the judgment for the sins of His people. His death was the exile of the true and living Ark of the Covenant, not because of His own sin, but because He bore our sins and the curse of the covenant.

In Christ's seeming defeat, God's glory was unveiled, and the victory was won.

Yahweh descended to the Philistines and was housed in the temple of their god, Dagon. But even in exile, Yahweh triumphed over their false gods, afflicting them with plagues just as He did in Egypt. And this is a type of Christ who broke the power of sin, death, and the Devil and principalities and powers of the world.

The cross was not the removal of God's glory but its ultimate revelation—a victory over every enemy, including sin, death, and darkness. Just as the ark's exile demonstrated Yahweh's supremacy over the gods of the Philistines, so the cross proclaimed Christ's definitive victory.

APPLICATION:

How shall we then live in light of this wonderful story? In 1 **Samuel 4**, the Israelites treated the ark of the covenant as a talisman, or lucky rabbits foot to secure victory over their enemies. They saw it not as a symbol of Yahweh's covenant presence but as a tool they could manipulate for their own purposes. This mistake led to their devastating defeat, and the ark itself was captured by the Philistines. Yahweh was teaching Israel—and us—a crucial lesson: **God cannot be used or manipulated for the sake of our human and earthly agendas.**

This same warning applies to us today. Dale Ralph Davis said: “Whenever the church stops singing ‘Thou art worthy,’ and begins chanting, ‘Thou art useful’ – well, then you know the ark has been captured.”¹

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, 1 Samuel, 55

Neither a generic reference to God, nor even to Jesus Christ, nor to Christian Nationalism, and especially not the Bible, none of the things can be treated as mere tools or religious talismans to be trotted out in the service of winning a culture war or restoring Western civilization.

Christian culture and Western civilization were not built by hollow invocations of some generic God whose name is displayed on our money, or in national songs, or superficial displays of some generic civic religion in which we celebrate “holidays.”

They were built by men and women who had a living and saving faith in Jesus Christ. They took serious the Lord’s words when he said, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” But if we reverse the order, and seek all these other things that we now miss because the glory of God has been removed from us because of our great sins, we are not going to get Him back by treating Him as an idol, and taking His name in vain, and using Him as a means to an end. If you want to see America Christian Again, then seek Heaven.

As CS Lewis said in his aptly named sermon, the Weight of Glory – *"If you aim at Heaven, you will get earth thrown in; if you aim at earth, you will get neither."*

Such is the case in our day. If we aim to use God, the Bible, or Christianity as tools to defeat our enemies or as means to secure political, cultural, or national victories, we will ultimately fail. Not only will we lose the earthly goals we are striving for, but we will also forfeit the blessing of Heaven. God will not bless a people who treat Him as a tool rather than as the Glorious Lord of Heaven and Earth.

The Israelites' mistake was not in desiring victory over their enemies but in attempting to achieve it while neglecting Yahweh Himself. They wanted His power but not His presence, His blessing but not His covenant. If we make the same error—seeking God's benefits without seeking God Himself—we will meet the same end. And so far, it looks like we have. But there are some signs of God's return to us even now.

So, our task is not to mess it up by trying to manipulate God to fight for us. Instead, we must:

1. **Seek the Lord with true hearts:** Lift up your hearts to worship Him truly, not for what He can do for you, but for who He is.

2. **Keep His worship and name pure:** Guard against taking His name in vain by reducing it to a political slogan or a means of achieving cultural power.
3. **Live in covenant obedience:** If we desire to see God fight for us and scatter our enemies, then we cannot live like His enemies, we must repent of our grievous sins, especially the national ones, like abortion. We must walk in His ways and obey His commands in love.

When we do this, God will rise to fight for us. He will scatter those who hate Him, and they will flee before Him. Not because we have manipulated Him through an improper use of His name, but because we are aligned with His heart and will, and because we love Him, and He loves us.

Let us humble ourselves before the Lord, seek Him with all our hearts, not taking His name in vain, but treating Him with the reverence that is due His glory. Amen.