

1st Samuel 4:1b-7:17
Judgment and Deliverance

Introduction

1. In the few short weeks that we've been studying the book of 1st Samuel we've seen three primary theological truths that keep re-appearing
 - a. The first is God is a god who saves/delivers
 - b. A second is that He opposes the proud but exalts the humble
 - c. A third is that He protects His people, but destroys those who oppose Him
2. These truths resonate throughout the entire book of 1st Samuel and form the theological framework through which we are to interpret the book
3. So, it's no surprise that we will see these same principles at work in our study today

A. The Lord judges Israel, Eli and his sons (Summary of 4:1b-22)

1. The last judge recorded in the book of Judges is Sampson who seemingly defeats the Philistines, but this was a regional defeat (the judges ruled small, individual regions of Israel)
2. Over the 40 years that Eli was judge in Israel, the Philistines continues to expand toward the east and their reach into Israel (there were five major, fortified Philistine cities in Canaan, the land given to Israel by God and conquered by them under Joshua)
3. In chapter 4 we learn that they are still at war with the Philistines and engage in two different battles:
 - a. In the first battle, Israel is defeated and 4,000 soldiers are killed they accurately identify that the Lord is ultimately the one that brought their defeat, but are clueless as to why (4:3a): **"When the people came into the camp, the elders of Israel said, 'Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines?..."**
 - b. In the second battle, Israel decides to take the Ark of the Covenant with them into battle thinking it (not God) will ensure their victory (4:3b): **"Let us take to ourselves from Shiloh the ark of the covenant of the LORD, that it may come among us and deliver us from the power of our enemies."**
 - 1) At first, the Philistines freak out when they learn Israel has brought the Ark of the Covenant into battle
 - 2) Like the Israelites, they mistakenly assumed that this would guarantee Israel's victory
 - 3) The reason they were afraid is that they were aware of what God had done to the Egyptians and they feared He would do the same to them (4:7-9): **"The Philistines were afraid, for they said, "God has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. ⁸ "Woe to us! Who shall deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who smote the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. ⁹ "Take courage and be men, O Philistines, or you will become slaves to the Hebrews, as they have been slaves to you; therefore, be men and fight.""**
 - 4) However, the battle ended up in disaster as Israel is defeated again, 30,000 soldiers are killed, along with Eli's two sons, and the Philistines capture the Ark
 - 5) An interesting note here: the Philistines refer to the "gods" (plural) of Israel in v. 8 believing them to be polytheistic—this is a tell-tale sign of the Israelites' idol worship

4. When Eli learns of his sons' deaths and the capture of the Ark, he falls back in his chair, breaks his neck and dies
5. This was a partial fulfillment of Samuel's prophecy against Eli from 3:10-14 (the other half is fulfilled when Solomon banished Abiathar, the last priest in Eli's line, and replaced him with Zadok (1 Kings 2:26-27, 35)
6. Finally, Eli's daughter-in-law (the wife of Phinehas) gives birth to a son, and with her dying breath names him, Ichabod, which means "there is no glory" (4:19:22): **"19 Now his daughter-in-law, Phinehas's wife, was pregnant and about to give birth; and when she heard the news that the ark of God was taken and that her father-in-law and her husband had died, she kneeled down and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. 20 And about the time of her death the women who stood by her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have given birth to a son." But she did not answer or pay attention. 21 And she called the boy Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel," because the ark of God was taken and because of her father-in-law and her husband. 22 She said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God was taken."**"

B. The Lord judges the Philistines (Summary of 5:1-6:12)
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1. Immediately upon capturing the Ark of the Covenant the Philistines find themselves under the judgement of God:
 - a. They first take the Ark to Ashdod and place it in the temple of their primary god, Dagon, where we see God's first two acts of judgement:
 - 1) His first act is to humiliate and execute the Philistine's god:
 - a) According to Robert Bergen, author of the New American Commentary on 1 & 2 Samuel, by setting the Ark next to Dagon in his temple, the Philistines were subjugating Yahweh to Dagon
 - b) In other words, the Israelite god was now an attendant to the Philistine god, Dagon, because he had been defeated by Dagon
 - c) However, God was having none of this humiliation (5:3-4): **"When the Ashdodites arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and set him in his place again. ⁴ But when they arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. And the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off on the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him."**
 - The next morning, Dagon was found bowing in worship (if you will) before the Ark: **"on his face to the ground before the Ark of the LORD"**
 - After putting Dagon back in his place, the next morning the Philistines find him on his face once again, but this time missing is head and palms of his hands (a symbol of military execution according to Bergen)
 - 2) God's second act of judgement was to infect the residents of Ashdod with tumors, rats and ultimately death (both mentioned later; 5:6): **"Now the hand of the LORD was heavy on the Ashdodites, and He ravaged them and smote them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territories."**

- b. When the Ashdodites finally had enough, they sent the Ark to Gath—but the residents of Gath didn't fare any better under God's judgment: more tumors, more rats and more death
- c. So, the residents of Gath then sent the Ark to Ekron:
 - 1) The residents of Ekron panic because they knew the afflictions Ashdod and Gath suffered
 - 2) Their reaction is priceless (5:10), "**And as the ark of God came to Ekron the Ekronites cried out, saying, "They have brought the ark of the God of Israel around to us, to kill us and our people."**"
 - 3) As God had done to Gath and Ashdod, He also did to the people of Ekron (5:11b-12): "**For there was a deadly confusion throughout the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. ¹² And the men who did not die were smitten with tumors and the cry of the city went up to heaven.**"
 - 4) So, they begged the five rulers of the Philistines to send the Ark back to Israel
- 2. Finally, after seven months of suffering under God's judgment, the five Philistinian rulers decide to send the Ark back to Israel:
 - a. Under the counsel of their religious leaders, the rulers agree to send the Ark back to Israel with a "**guilt**" offering for Yahweh: five golden tumors and five golden rats (one for each of the five rulers/cities of the Philistines)
 - b. The counsel also came with a warning (6:6): "**Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? When He had severely dealt with them, did they not allow the people to go, and they departed?**" – it seems everybody in this story is familiar with this concept accept the Israelites!!
 - c. The religious leaders also devise a test to determine if God is really behind the plagues—they were to place the Ark on a wooden cart, and hook it up to two "miltch cows" (cows kept to provide milk, not trained to pull carts), and let them go:
 - 1) If the cows headed toward Beth-Shemesh, the nearest Levite city, then they would know God was behind the plagues
 - 2) If the cows headed somewhere else, then they would know it wasn't God's hand against them
 - d. The Philistine rules followed the cows and sure enough, they headed straight for Beth-Shemesh indicating the plagues were definitely the hand of God

C. The Lord Judges the Levites (6:13-21)
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- 1. As one would expect, as soon as the people of Beth-Shemesh see the Ark they rejoice
- 2. However, all does not end well for them because God ultimately judges them and kills over 50,000 men:
 - a. Beth-Shemesh was a Levite city which is where the priests lived
 - b. As priests, they were expected to know the Law and care for God's tabernacle, including the Ark—and there were specific rules regarding the care of the Ark
 - c. Numbers 4:5-6 indicates that the Ark was to be veiled or hidden from view:
 - 1) When it was in the tabernacle, there was a screen that hid it from view
 - 2) When it was transported, it was to be covered
 - d. Yet, when the Ark arrived in Beth-Shemesh we learn that the priests took it off the cart and put in on a large stone, in essence putting it on display for all to see (6:13-15): " ¹³ **Now the**

people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley, and they raised their eyes and saw the ark and were glad to see it. ¹⁴ The cart came into the field of Joshua the Beth-shemite and stood there where there was a large stone; and they split the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. ¹⁵ The Levites took down the ark of the LORD and the box that was with it, in which were the articles of gold, and put them on the large stone; and the men of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices that day to the LORD."

- e. V. 19 states that God struck down the men because they had **"looked into the Ark of the LORD"**:
 - 1) This is the way almost every English translations renders it
 - 2) However, the proposition can also be translated as "at" which I believe might be more appropriate in light of the context since they had put the Ark up on a large stone for public viewing
 - 3) When understood this way, rather than 50,070 men all standing in line to view the contents of the Ark and then being struck down, the 50,070 men is a reference to all the all the priests in the city who should have known better than to put the Ark on display to be looked at
 - 4) Either way, they were judged for profaning the Ark of the LORD
- 3. How many men were killed?
 - a. The NAU, NET, KJV, NKJV say 50,700 men
 - b. The NI, ESV, CBS say 70 men
 - c. The MT and all ancient manuscripts say 50,070 men so there is no manuscript evidence suggesting only 70 men
 - d. The figure 70 comes from Josephus
 - e. Some also argue that such a large number of men would have been impossible because the population of Beth-Shemesh wouldn't have been that large
 - f. However, there isn't any archeological evidence to suggest it wasn't that big
 - g. Plus, the text refers to God striking down these men as a "great slaughter" (the same language used when the Philistines killed 30,000 soldiers)
 - h. So, the best evidence makes it clear that God struck down over 50,000 men, probably all the priests in Beth-Shemesh
 - i. This means that God killed more than the Philistines—and the lesson may be that maybe the Israelites should have feared God more than their enemies

D. The Lord delivers Israel (7:1-17)

- 1. Twenty years after God judged the Levites above, Israel began to **"lament after the LORD"** (2):
 - a. Earlier we learned that the Lord had been silent pretty much since Samson served as judge (it has been approximately sixty years since Samson's death)
 - b. They were also still being oppressed by the Philistines
 - c. This oppression, and God's silence, apparently led Israel to some self-reflection and mourning for their God
- 2. But, as Israel should have learned in the past, God's deliverance doesn't come without repentance:

- a. So, Samuel calls on Israel to repent (3): **"Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, "If you return to the LORD with all your heart, remove the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your hearts to the LORD and serve Him alone; "**
 - b. If they would do that, God would deliver them from the Philistines (3b): **"and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines."**
3. Israel responds to Samuel's call and repents:
- a. They stopped serving the foreign Canaanite gods (4): **"So the sons of Israel removed the Baals and the Ashtaroth and served the LORD alone."**
 - b. Samuel interceded for them (5): **"Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel to Mizpah and I will pray to the LORD for you.""**
 - c. They confessed their sin (6): **"They gathered to Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day and said there, "We have sinned against the LORD." And Samuel judged the sons of Israel at Mizpah."**
4. The Lord delivers Israel from the Philistines (7-14):
- a. When the Philistines prepare to attack, the Israelites turn to the Lord for deliverance (7-8)—this episode is in stark contrast to the two battles in chapter 4 where Israel seemed puzzled why God did not give them victory over the Philistines, and placed their trust in the Ark rather than God Himself
 - b. When Samuel cries out to the Lord for Israel, we are told that "the LORD answered him" (9)—this stands in contrast to the previous 60 years of silence
 - c. And this time, when the Lord answers He does it in a big way:
 - 1) The victory is clearly miraculous—God confused the Philistines by "thundering a great thunder on that day against the Philistines and confused them so that they were routed before Israel" (10)
 - 2) Israel then pursued the Philistines throughout the land and struck them down (11)—the defeat was so devastating that they never entered the land of Israel again during Samuel's life time
 - 3) The Lord's hand remained against the Philistines (13)
 - 4) All the land that the Philistines had taken from Israel was restored to them (14)
 - 5) And, there was peace between Israel and the Amorites (another Semitic group living throughout Canaan)

Conclusion

1. We saw four different events in our study today and if you noticed, the first three reflected God's opposition toward the proud, the arrogant and those who oppose Him
 - a. He judged Eli and his wicked sons
 - b. He judged the Philistines, and shamed their false god, Dagon
 - c. He also judged and destroyed an entire town of priests for their total disregard and disdain for God's Law and the Ark of the Covenant
2. But, we also saw the grace of God at work when He exalted and delivered Israel when they repented of their sin, sought after God, and humbled themselves
3. Notice how this reflects the Gospel