



The Philistines and the Ark

Lesson 11

I Samuel 4-8

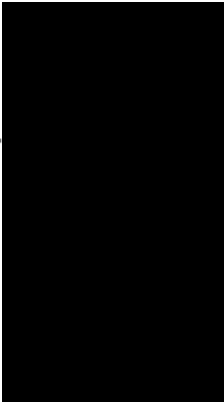


What happened before?

In our last study, we saw the birth of the great prophet Samuel. He was raised by Eli and served in the tabernacle from the time he was a small child. God spoke to him while he was very young and told him that he was going to remove Eli's family from their leadership. Another prophet of God had told Eli that both of his wicked sons would die on the same day.

BIBLE STORY:

Once again, the Philistines, came up to fight against Israel. When the Philistines attacked, they fought with great fury and killed about 4,000 of the men in Israel's army. After the bitter defeat, the elders of Israel were puzzled over why God gave Philistia victory over them. They concluded it was a judgment of God upon them, but did not know why.




They decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant into their camp. They were sure that would bring them victory. They must have felt that the Ark had some kind of special power that would help them. But, they made a great mistake; the Ark had no special power. The power was in God and they had been disobedient to Him!

The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phineas, were with the Ark when it was brought into the camp. The army of Israel was excited; they shouted so loud that the ground shook. The Philistines heard the shout and they were afraid. They thought God was inside the Ark of the Covenant. Maybe some of the Israelites thought that also. The Philistines knew of the great signs and wonders God had done for the Israelites from the time of their deliverance from Egypt.

Though the Philistines were afraid, they were also determined to fight harder than they had ever fought before. They killed 30,000 of the Hebrews and the others ran away. They not only took the Ark of God, but they also killed Hophni and Phineas.

One man, who escaped from the Philistines, ran to Shiloh with the report of the defeat. In the meantime, Eli had gone out to the gate of the city to watch and wait for word of how the battle went. He was sitting there on a large stone when the man came with the report. All the people cried out in dismay. Eli asked what had happened. The messenger told him that the battle had been lost, that both his sons had died and that

the Philistines had taken the Ark of God. Eli was 98 years old and to hear that the Philistines had captured the Ark was more than he could take. He fell off the stone, broke his neck and died. Eli judged Israel 40 years.

 The Philistines thought they had done a great thing in capturing the Ark, for they thought it was the God of the Israelites. But they suffered terribly while the Ark was in their possession. At Ashdod, the Ark was placed in the temple of Dagon. God caused Dagon to fall on the ground. When it fell its head and hands broke off. Then the men of Ashdod were stricken with terrible tumors. They said, "The Ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is harsh toward us and Dagon our god." They carried the Ark to Gath and the same thing happened to the men there. Those men then took it to Ekron where many died there and others were stricken with tumors.

The Philistines knew they would have to get rid of the Ark, but they did not know how to do it. They called for the priests and the diviners, saying, "What shall we do with the Ark of the Lord? Tell us how we should send it to its place." They were told to make golden images of the tumors and the rats that ravaged the land and send them along with the Ark as a trespass offering to the Lord.

Some of the Philistines were not sure the Ark was causing all the suffering and wanted some proof that it was the reason for the tumors and other afflictions. The priests told them, "Now therefore, make a new cart, take two milk cows which have never been yoked, and hitch the cows to the cart; and take their calves home, away from them. Then take the ark of the Lord and set it on the cart; and put the articles of gold that you are returning to Him as a trespass offering in a chest by its side. Then send it away, and let it go. And watch: if it goes up the road to its own territory, to Beth Shemesh, then He (God) has done us this great evil. But if not, then we shall know that it is not His (God's) hand that struck us—it happened to us by chance."

The Philistines followed the instructions. They let the cows go of their own accord. Normally, a cow would go towards her calf. These cows went away from their calves and headed straight for Beth Shemesh, a town in Israel. Now there could be no doubt that God had caused the suffering.

The men of Beth Shemesh rejoiced when they saw the Ark coming. They broke up the wooden cart, burned it and offered the cows as a burnt offering unto the Lord. All seemed to be going well—until the men of Beth Shemesh looked inside the Ark. More than 50,000 men died at Beth Shemesh because they disrespected the holy Ark of the Covenant!

Those who were yet alive, decided to send the Ark to Kirjath Jearim, another city in Israel.

At Kirjath Jearim, the Ark was placed in the house of Abinadab. Eleazar, Abinadab's son, was sanctified as a priest to take care of the Ark of God. The Ark remained at his house for a lengthy period of time—until the time of King David.

It was a terrible time for the Israelites as the Philistines continued to oppress them. They cried out to God for 20 years and God did not answer them! Why not?

God did not answer them because they continued to serve idols while calling upon Him. Samuel said that if they really were ready to return to God, they had to get rid of the strange gods they worshipped. They must serve the Lord only. Indeed, the children of Israel did get rid of the idols. God was now ready to hear their prayers. The people confessed their sins. At Mizpah, Samuel offered sacrifices to the Lord and prayed for them. The Lord heard his prayers.



As Samuel was making the offering, the Philistines gathered around Israel again, ready to start another battle. The Lord brought up a powerful storm and the Philistines were scattered. While they were on the run, Israel ran after them and won the battle. When they returned to Mizpah, Samuel set up a stone for a memorial and called it "Ebenezer." It was a memorial to the fact that God helped Israel.

After taking back several cities from the Philistines, Israel had peace for awhile. Samuel judged Israel for many years. His home was at Ramah. Samuel built an altar to the Lord there. Samuel was among the greatest of all the judges. He served for many years as a prophet, priest and judge. He had two sons who also served as judges, but they were corrupt and received bribes from the people.

As Samuel grew old, the elders of Israel decided they wanted no more judges. They wanted a king so they could be like the other nations. Samuel was deeply grieved over their request, but God told him, "They have not rejected you; they have rejected me." God was king over Israel, but they wanted to be like the other nations and have an earthly king seated on a throne in a capitol city.

Samuel told the people that if they had a king, it would not go well for them, that he would be harsh, would tax the people heavily and would take the fruits of their labors. Having a king would not make them happy. If they chose to have a king and then later cried out to God to help and protect them from the king, God would not hear their cry! The

people insisted upon a king in spite of the warning. God said, “Give them a king.”

It was not necessarily sinful for Israel to have a king. It was, however, sinful for Israel not to trust in God. They did not want to do things in God’s way. Instead, they wanted to be like the nations around them. That was the problem that Israel seemed to have almost from the beginning. We must learn to always be content with God’s ways and not try to be like the world around us.

