

## **When Good-Luck Charm Theology fails to Work (1 Samuel 4:1b-22)**

### **Introduction:-**

*The section from 1 Samuel 4-6 is often referred to as the "Ark Narrative", because these chapters are taken up with the story and journey of the Ark of the Covenant from Shiloh to a place called Kiriath Jearim some 16 kilometres west of Jerusalem. And so to begin with, Chapter 4 tells us of the Ark's capture at the hands of the Philistines. Chapter 5 then tells us what happens while the Ark is with the Philistines, and Chapter 6 tells us how the Philistines finally sent the Ark back to Israelite territory. Finally, this Ark narrative concludes at 2 Samuel 6 with the story of David's finding and installing the Ark in Jerusalem. And although the events of these chapters seem to suggest otherwise, the Ark narrative makes it clear that the Lord (Yahweh) was always in control, and stood behind the total course of events as they unfolded. And standing within the larger section of 1 Samuel 1-7, Israel's defeat at the hand of the Philistines suggests that this course of events took place because of the corruption of the priestly leadership of Israel in the house of Eli at Shiloh. And as we begin to focus our lenses more closely on Chapter 4, we will discover that Samuel completely disappears from the Ark Narrative, and does not reappear again until 1 Samuel 7:3. Why should this be so? One main reason is that within these chapters, God will now fulfil His word about the old regime, before returning to the new leadership under Samuel at 1 Samuel 7. Further, in the meantime, Yahweh will teach Israel some vital lessons in "Arkeology" in Chapters 5-6, before they come to repentance under Samuel at 1 Samuel 7. Finally, Chapter 4 falls into three main sections, with verses 1-11, verses 12-18, and finally verses 19-22. The first section reports the battles with the Philistines, and concludes with the notice of two deaths, namely those of Hophni and Phinehas. The second and third sections relate to the news of the battle, and also closes with the report of two deaths, namely that of Eli and the wife of Phinehas. Thus, with this structure, and all of these deaths, the prophecies of the Man of God and Samuel comes to pass, relating to the priestly house of Eli. And as a final point, the focus of Chapter 4 is the Ark of the Covenant, mentioned some 12 times throughout, no doubt to symbolize its significance for all of Israel. What then can we learn from this Chapter today?*

### **1. First we discover a case of asking the right question, but seeking the wrong answer (verses 1-11)**

*This section begins with the sudden and abrupt introduction of the Philistines, and their war against Israel. We would not have expected this kind of information given the first three chapters of 1 Samuel. But the introduction of the Philistine threat to Israel will provide one important reason why Israel will later ask for a king at 1 Samuel 8. But in the meantime, what should Israel do, in order to meet this very real challenge, which stood as a serious threat to their very existence and nationhood? Initially, Israel engaged the Philistines in battle, and lost about four thousand men on the battlefield. And when we experience defeat, we also need to enquire into the cause. And so when Israel was defeated in so striking a manner, it was natural for them to ask "why." So the elders of the people asked the question, "Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?" (v.3a). They were right to ask the question, and they were right to attribute their defeat to the Lord (v.3b). On the basis of previous experience, the Lord had often given them victory in war, sometimes quite miraculously. On these occasions, when they were in right standing with God, they were victorious. But when they sinned, they experienced defeat, as at Jericho followed by the debacle at Ai in Joshua chapters 6-8. But in the passage before us, they asked*

*the right question, but they answered the question too quickly, and in their own way, instead of seeking to find God's answer in the right way. At this point, was not Samuel already attested as the true prophet of Israel, who spoke the words of the Lord to all Israel at Shiloh? But in this story, Samuel is conspicuous by his absence. Instead, they came up with an answer that was both impetuous and foolish. They decided that they needed to be more religious than ever before, and carry the Ark of the Covenant before them as they went into battle. After all, was this not the manner in which previous battles were fought and won in the past? And so they thought that this action would bring back their old spiritual power (v.3b). But, in taking this line of action, they were also seeking to involve the Lord in an Ark war, against their own perceptions that the same Lord had already been responsible for their defeat!! And so clearly, the fetching of the Ark from Shiloh was really treated as a rebellious "good luck charm" that they only hoped would work for them on this occasion. It was also a twisting of God's arm, that one commentator says is not faith, but superstition. It was of no value to have the Ark as a kind of good luck charm. Israel sought the Ark of the Lord, and not the Lord of the Ark. When God's people fail, it is so easy to increase one's "religiousness", but to do so, does no good. The cause of the failure of Israel was the sin of Shiloh. But apparently, Israel could not see this!! Superstition occurs when we place our trust in buildings, or in religious objects, or even in "holy" people, or "correct theology", instead of dealing directly with God. Elisha understood this point perfectly at 2 Kings 2:14, when after picking up Elijah's cloak at the river Jordan, he neither trusted in Elijah himself, nor in his cloak, but said, "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah", before striking the Jordan with Elijah's cloak, and then passing over. There is only thing that enables us to please God and enjoy His victories. And that is to deal with Him directly, and to find out His will for our lives, and please Him by direct obedience. If that is not done, no amount of religion or tradition will bring His blessing. Finally in this passage, when the Ark came into the camp (v.5), Israel raised such a "great shout", that the earth shook, echoing the victorious shout at Jericho in Joshua 6:5, 20. But on this occasion, such charismatic religiosity will not be blessed any more than other forms of religiosity if there is sin in the camp. Rather, instead of victory, the Israelites suffered defeat at the hands of the Lord through the Philistines, even though the Philistines were initially alarmed at all this shouting, and acknowledged that these "mighty gods" were those who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. As a result of this battle, Israel lost 30,000 foot soldiers, and the Ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phineas, died.*

## **2. Secondly, we discover the report of bad news, leading to the death of Eli (verses 12-18)**

*In this middle section, that same day, a Benjamite (perhaps subtly pointing to the passing of leadership in Israel from the house of Eli to the kingship under Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin) ran from the battle line to Shiloh in order to report the bad news to Eli. The scene is full of word play and tragic irony. Eli is sitting on his chair by the side of the road "watching" (v.13) for a messenger, but "he could not see" (v.15), physically or spiritually. Then upon hearing news of Israel's heavy defeat at the hands of the Philistines, plus news of the deaths of his two sons Hophni and Phineas, and especially the news of the capture of the Ark of the Covenant, he fell backward off his chair by the side of the road, for he was old and "heavy", thus linking his death with the judgment announced earlier at 1 Samuel 2:29, "Why do you honour your sons more than me by fattening yourselves?" Finally we read that he had led or judged Israel for forty years, as one of the last of the Judges (verse 18).*

### **3. Thirdly, and finally, we discover the meaning of this Report through the birth of Ichabod (verses 19-22)**

*When it was reported back at verse 18 that Eli had fallen off his chair and died because he was old and "heavy", the word for "heavy" (Kabed) is similar to the word "glory" (Kabod) at verses 21-22, meaning weight or glory. And so, Eli's death, is especially attached to the news of the capture of the Ark of the Covenant, when the wife of Phineas gives birth to a son, and gives him the name of "Ichabod" (meaning "No Glory"), saying, "The Glory has departed from Israel" - because of the capture of the Ark of God and the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband. In this way, the woman answered her own question with regard to the Glory departing from Israel, understood with the capture of the Ark of the Covenant. The verb "departed" (gala) means "to go into exile", and "glory" (kabod) refers not to the Ark itself, but to the presence of God enthroned over the Ark. And so, God had gone into exile, reminiscent of Ezekiel's vision of God's glory departing from the Temple over the mountains (Ezekiel 10:18). But ironically, these deaths show that God was still in Israel, and in control, fulfilling the earlier prophecies of both the Man of God, and Samuel. Finally, we may ask ourselves, could the name "Ichabod" ("The Glory has departed"), be justly written over our own lives, and many of our church sanctuaries? If so, how might we begin to prepare for the return of the Lord's glory to His sanctuary, as it happened in Ezekiel's day, when the glory finally returned to the Temple? (Ezekiel 43:1-5).*

#### **Conclusion:-**

*This passage teaches us that sometimes in life we can place our trust in all kinds of sacred symbols, traditions, and things dearest to us, only to find that in the end they fail us, as the Ark of the Covenant did for Israel on this occasion. Perhaps we too have tied our expectations of blessing to our performance of right religious practices. In fact, in this story, Israel asked the right question about themselves, but they tragically sought their answer in the wrong direction, by taking hold of the Ark of the Lord, as some kind of magical good-luck charm, instead of consulting the Lord of the Ark. It is so easy to mistake our symbols for the God to whom they point. And in this story, it was in fact the enemy who finally reminded Israel of the exodus event, and God's great deliverance of his people there. This is what God's people should have reclaimed for themselves, as they faced the present challenge of the Philistines! And as we think about that event, God's people would forever be reminded that there would be no exodus deliverance from Egypt, without Passover. The tenth plague would always remind God's people that when the angel of death saw the blood of the unblemished lamb upon their houses, that he would pass over them, and spare them from death. And this would ultimately point to the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, where Jesus as the unblemished lamb of God, shed his blood for our sin, that we might know peace and reconciliation with God. And according to John's gospel, the Cross of Jesus Christ would be the place where God's glory would be finally displayed for all people to see (John 13:31-32). Today, the Cross of Jesus Christ is not only our greatest symbol, but it is our only meeting place with God, for it is only at the foot of the Cross, that we can find peace with God, and forgiveness of sins, leading to the gift of eternal life itself, as the dying thief discovered in Luke's Gospel (Luke 23:39-43). Have we been to the Cross? We can do that today as we come to Him by simple faith, trusting in all that Jesus has done for us, by dying for our sins. This is the greatest journey that we will ever make in this life, this side of heaven. Will you make that journey today? Your eternal destiny depends upon it. Amen.*

