

What's the Message? – Lesson 48

Today we shall see a major turning point in the history of Israel as they are humiliated by the Philistines.

Greeting in the name of Jesus, our Savior. We pray today that this lesson will give you a positive example, an example that teaches us that our relationship with God is not dependant upon the strength of an army, but upon faith, trust in God, and obedience to Him out of love for what He has done for us. Amen.

Last time we saw how God prepared Samuel for the task of leading the people of Israel as they grew and developed into a nation. In this lesson we see the first major challenge he encountered. We find it in chapter 4 of the book of 1st Samuel. It deals with a portion of the “Sea Peoples” we know as the Philistines.

Now, it is one thing that the Israelites could be victorious when dealing with the smaller nations around them, nations who – like Israel – had no standing army. But the Philistines were a completely different matter – they had a trained, disciplined, and experienced army of full-time soldiers. An army that was equipped with the latest and most fearsome weapons.

We begin with the opening verse of chapter 4: *Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines . . . the Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines.* Then the elders of Israel asked: *Why has the Lord put us to rout today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, that He may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.*

So the ark was brought to the battle scene. There was a great reaction in both camps. There were shouts of joy in the camp of Israel, and fear and concern in the camp of the Philistines . . . because they recalled the reputation of Israel and how they had gotten away from Egypt and conquered the other nations in the land of Palestine.

And they said, *Take courage, and acquit yourselves like men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; acquit yourselves like men, and fight.* And what had been thought impossible happened; Israel was defeated and the Ark of the Covenant was captured !

Not only was the Ark captured, but the two priests, the sons of Eli, Hophni and Phineas were killed as well. When Eli was told what had happened, he fell over backward and died. All of this led to the conclusion in verse 22: *The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.*

And that, Teacher, gives us a summary of the threat of the Philistines and the challenge to the leadership of Samuel. It is an interesting story, but what is the significance to us? What is the message?

Ask yourself the question, “why were the Israelites defeated by the Philistines in the first place?” Was it because the Philistines had such a great army, or was it because Israel had fallen back into their old ways of rejecting the Lord and turning to the Ba’als and the Ashtaroath ? How can we reject the Lord for many years on end, and then expect to call on Him to save us when we have a serious problem?

Then when Israel considered the disaster that had just happened, what kind of a solution did they come up with? Get the magic box, they said. Get the Ark of the Covenant and bring God into our midst so that He can fight for us ! How pathetic ! The Ark had become an end in itself. Many people today are guilty of doing the same thing. Making church membership and the book we know as the Bible an end in itself – as if it were filled with magic that we can turn on and off at our whim – is a false religion. It is something we call Bibliolatry.

It is something that replaces the Lord of Heaven and Earth, and puts a new god in our life. It is definitely not in keeping with the covenant God made with Abraham. In this covenant we are taught to worship the Lord, and serve Him only ! The capture of the Ark was a sign that the relationship between Israel and God was no longer as it

should be. Israel had deserted Yahweh, and must learn the consequences. It was a very dark day in the life of Israel to be separated from God. It will be that way for us, too, if we turn ourselves away from our Lord.

Next time we shall see the consequences of the capture of the Ark.