

THE ARK LOST AND RETURNED

BIBLE TEXT : I Samuel 4:1-18; 5:1-5; 6:1-3, 7-15, 19, 20

LESSON 201 Junior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God?" (I Samuel 6:20).

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

1 Samuel 4:1-18

¹ And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out against the Philistines to battle, and pitched beside Ebenezer: and the Philistines pitched in Aphek.

² And the Philistines put themselves in array against Israel: and when they joined battle, Israel was smitten before the Philistines: and they slew of the army in the field about four thousand men.

³ And when the people were come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, Wherefore hath the LORD smitten us to day before the Philistines? Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies.

⁴ So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from thence the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, which dwelleth *between* the cherubims: and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, *were* there with the ark of the covenant of God.

⁵ And when the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again.

⁶ And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, What *meaneth* the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews? And they understood that the ark of the LORD was come into the camp.

⁷ And the Philistines were afraid, for they said, God is come into the camp. And they said, Woe unto us! for there hath not been such a thing heretofore.

⁸ Woe unto us! who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty Gods? these *are* the Gods that smote the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness.

⁹ Be strong, and quit yourselves like men, O ye Philistines, that ye be not

BIBLE REFERENCES:

NOTES:

War with the Philistines

Eli continued in the office of priest until Samuel grew up. Eli was not careful to teach the people about God, and the Word of the Lord was precious, or scarce. Eli was slack also in admonishing the Children of Israel to pray and seek God. Perhaps Eli did reprove them, but he did not insist on obedience to God.

We do not read that the Children of Israel asked God's advice when they went to war against the Philistines. There is no indication that the people prayed. The Children of Israel were smitten by the Philistines, and about 4,000 of them were slain.

Sin in the Camp

Many years before, the promise of God to the Children of Israel had been, "One man of you shall chase a thousand: for the LORD your God, he it is that fighteth for you" (Joshua 23:10). The Children of Israel were no longer obeying and serving God, so He was not fighting for them.

The people talked among themselves and wondered why they had been smitten by the Philistines. Seemingly, they blamed God for permitting the Philistines to win the battles, but the Israelites had not fasted and prayed nor even asked Eli to pray for them.

Even though Eli had failed to teach the Children of Israel the ways of the Lord, certainly some of them had heard how God had dealt in times past with the Children of Israel in similar circumstances. In the days of Joshua, they were defeated at Ai because there was sin among them when Achan took the accursed thing (**Joshua 7:1** ¹ But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed thing: and the anger of the LORD was kindled against the children of Israel.). Joshua, their leader, rent his clothes and, along with the elders of the people, put dust upon his head as a sign of repentance before God. Joshua prayed before the Ark of the Lord until the eventide. God told Joshua that they had sinned, for which reason they could not stand before their enemies. Moreover, God said that He would not be with the Children of Israel unless the sin was destroyed and the guilty person punished (**Joshua 7:12** ¹² Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, *but* turned *their* backs before their enemies, because they were accursed: neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you). The Children of Israel uncovered the sin. The accursed things were burned outside the camp, and the guilty man was punished. When the Children of Israel had thus obeyed God, they went to battle against Ai again, and God gave them the victory.

The Council

This time the Israelites held a council. They acted very foolishly in trying to get God's favor without praying and repenting. The Children of Israel decided to remove the Ark of the Covenant from Shiloh. The Ark of the Covenant was a

servants unto the Hebrews, as they have been to you: quit yourselves like men, and fight.

¹⁰ And the Philistines fought, and Israel was smitten, and they fled every man into his tent: and there was a very great slaughter; for there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen.

¹¹ And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain.

¹² And there ran a man of Benjamin out of the army, and came to Shiloh the same day with his clothes rent, and with earth upon his head.

¹³ And when he came, lo, Eli sat upon a seat by the wayside watching: for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city, and told *it*, all the city cried out.

¹⁴ And when Eli heard the noise of the crying, he said, What *meaneth* the noise of this tumult? And the man came in hastily, and told Eli.

¹⁵ Now Eli was ninety and eight years old; and his eyes were dim, that he could not see.

¹⁶ And the man said unto Eli, I *am* he that came out of the army, and I fled to day out of the army. And he said, What is there done, my son?

¹⁷ And the messenger answered and said, Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there hath been also a great slaughter among the people, and thy two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God is taken.

¹⁸ And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God, that he fell from off the seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck brake, and he died: for he was an old man, and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years.

1 Samuel 5:1-5

¹ And the Philistines took the ark of God, and brought it from Ebenezer unto Ashdod.

² When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon.

³ And when they of Ashdod arose early on the morrow, behold, Dagon *was* fallen upon his face to the earth before the ark of the LORD. And they

symbol of the Spirit of God and His presence at the Mercy Seat.

The Ark had been carried only once before in a battle. At that time, the Lord gave the instructions how the Children of Israel should take Jericho. The Ark of the Covenant was carried about the city with them as the Children of Israel marched. God had told them to take the Ark that time.

God's Chosen Place

He also told them that the Ark must be set in the "most holy place" (Exodus 26:34) in the Tabernacle, their place of worship. In a place where God chose (**Deuteronomy 12:5** ⁵ But unto the place which the LORD your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, *even* unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come:), they were instructed to worship when they went into the Land of Canaan. In Shiloh the Tabernacle of worship was set up (**Joshua 18:1** ¹ And the whole congregation of the children of Israel assembled together at Shiloh, and set up the tabernacle of the congregation there. And the land was subdued before them), and there had been no instruction from God that it should be moved. It would be dangerous to move the Ark without God's permission; but Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, the priests, went along with the Ark.

They did not seem to realize that though they still had the Ark, the Spirit of the Lord had departed from them because of their sin. The Children of Israel put their trust in the Ark rather than in the Lord whom it represented. They should have looked to God, for it would have been His power that would scatter the enemy. There are some people today who are satisfied with a form of religion but deny the power thereof. They are concerned about the outward appearance rather than with a clean heart.

The Ark and the Enemy

When the Ark was taken into the camp, the Children of Israel shouted with a great shout as if the victory were already theirs. The enemy heard the shout, and saw the Ark. The Philistines knew that the Ark was a token of the presence of the Lord. The shout of the Israelites and the presence of the Ark put fear into the hearts of the Philistines. Being idolatrous people, they knew not but that the Ark was God Himself. They remembered what miracles God had performed during the wanderings of the Children of Israel in the wilderness when the Ark was carried with them. The enemy knew that the Ark had never before been thus moved into battle against them. The Philistines did not surrender but encouraged one another to be strong, to act like men, and to fight.

Defeat and Death

The account of the battle is short. Israel was defeated; and in panic every man fled to his tent. Thirty thousand of Israel's footmen were slain, along with Hophni and Phinehas, the *sons* of Eli. The Ark of the Lord was captured by the Philistines. The Children of Israel had had courage and a certain confidence, but they also had sin. They had put their faith in the Ark instead of in the Lord Himself. A person may be courageous and sincere in his belief; but his confidence and faith must be directed into the right channel, in the true and living God.

A man from the Israelite army, an eyewitness, ran ahead to Shiloh to carry the message of defeat. Along the wayside was Eli, awaiting news of the battle. His heart trembled with fear for the safety of the Ark of the Lord. He had not had the courage to refuse the people and keep the Ark at Shiloh, yet in his heart he knew that they had sinned.

Eli seemingly showed no emotion when he received the

took Dagon, and set him in his place again.

⁴ And when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon *was* fallen upon 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 upon the threshold; only *the stump of Dagon* was left to him.

⁵ Therefore neither the priests of Dagon, nor any that come into Dagon's house, tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod unto this day.

1 Samuel 6:1-3

¹ And the ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months.

² And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners, saying, What shall we do to the ark of the LORD? tell us wherewith we shall send it to his place.

³ And they said, If ye send away the ark of the God of Israel, send it not empty; but in any wise return him a trespass offering: then ye shall be healed, and it shall be known to you why his hand is not removed from you.

1 Samuel 6:7-15

⁷ Now therefore make a new cart, and take two milch kine, on which there hath come no yoke, and tie the kine to the cart, and bring their calves home from them:

⁸ And take the ark of the LORD, and lay it upon the cart; and put the jewels of gold, which ye return him *for* a trespass offering, in a coffer by the side thereof; and send it away, that it may go.

⁹ And see, if it goeth up by the way of his own coast to Bethshemesh, *then* he hath done us this great evil: but if not, then we shall know that *it is* not his hand *that* smote us: it *was* a chance *that* happened to us.

¹⁰ And the men did so; and took two milch kine, and tied them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home:

¹¹ And they laid the ark of the LORD upon the cart, and the coffer with the mice of gold and the images of their

news of defeat and the death of his two sons, as if he had expected God's prophecy against them to be fulfilled at this time. But when Eli heard that the **Ark** had been captured, he fell backward off the seat by the gate, and his neck was broken. At the age of 98 years, and after judging Israel **40** years, Eli thus died without speaking another word.

The Loss of the Ark

Great judgment came upon Eli's sons as God had pronounced: "In one day they shall die both of them" (1 Samuel 2:34). Hophni and Phinehas had left the place of their duty and had put themselves out of God's protection. They were out of place on the battlefield. They realized their folly and failure too late; but we can learn a lesson from their experience.

The ears of the Children of Israel did tingle (1 Samuel 3:11), as God had said, when they heard the news of the battle. The defeat was a calamity. Israel's forfeiting the Ark brought no honor to God. It brought loss to Israel and dishonor to Shiloh, for never again was that place to have the Ark of the Lord.

The Ark and an Idol

In the meantime, the Philistines were pleased and proud of their victory. They did no harm to the Ark but carried it to a place of safety in an idol temple, the house of Dagon in Ashdod, one of their cities. God is not worshiped at all if He is not worshiped alone. The Ark triumphed over Dagon in his own temple. God will not be worshiped with another god, but above all gods. The idol fell upon its face in the position of a conquered enemy, before the Ark of the Lord. The priests of Dagon made haste to set the idol in its place. Next morning, Dagon had not only tumbled to the ground, but was broken. Its head and hands were cut off so that only a stump was left of Dagon. One would think that the Philistines would recognize that Dagon was exposed as merely an idol, that the idol had no power, that it, was unworthy to be prayed to or to receive honor; but the Philistines were not convinced that the Lord God of Israel was the only true God. Their hearts were hardened in their idolatry.

The Ark in the Midst of the Enemy

For seven months the Philistines were plagued because of the Ark of the Lord, yet they did not want to return it. From one city to another the Ark was moved, and everywhere there was "deadly destruction." Those who did not die were smitten with a disease.

After the Philistines learned that they had no peace or safety with the Ark in their possession, they met to decide what to do with it. They were forced by pain and fear to return the Ark. They built a new cart, which was drawn by two cows, and the Ark was returned to the Children of Israel. The Philistines received no ransom or money for it. They were glad to be rid of the Ark, and gave jewels as an offering, that the hand of the Lord would be lifted from them.

Disrespect

The Children of Israel apparently had made no attempt to rescue or ransom the Ark, or even to inquire about it. They did welcome its return; and the Ark was placed on a great stone in the field of Joshua, a Bethshemite. There the Ark was left uncovered and exposed to inspection. Though contrary to the requirements of the Law, the Israelites used the cart for wood, and the cows for burnt offerings. This was not a proper sacrifice, nor was it offered by the priests at the Tabernacle. The men of

emerods.

¹² And the kine took the straight way to the way of Bethshemesh, *and* went along the highway, lowing as they went, and turned not aside *to* the right hand or *to* the left; and the lords of the Philistines went after them unto the border of Bethshemesh.

¹³ And *they of* Bethshemesh *were* reaping their wheat harvest in the valley: and they lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see *it*.

¹⁴ And the cart came into the field of Joshua, a Bethshemite, and stood there, where *there was* a great stone: and they clave the wood of the cart, and offered the kine a burnt offering unto the LORD.

¹⁵ And the Levites took down the ark of the LORD, and the coffer that *was* with it, wherein the jewels of gold *were*, and put *them* on the great stone: and the men of Bethshemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices the same day unto the LORD.

1 Samuel 6:19-20

¹⁹ And he smote the men of Bethshemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD, even he smote of the people fifty thousand and threescore and ten men: and the people lamented, because the LORD had smitten *many* of the people with a great slaughter.

²⁰ And the men of Bethshemesh said, Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? and to whom shall he go up from us?

Beth-shemesh were glad to see the Ark — but they had no right to look into it. Not even the priests had a right to look into the Ark of the Covenant. For that reason they were smitten by the hand of God, and many were slain. Their disrespect and irreverence to the Ark *wee'* offenses against God. The Children of Israel found that a person must be careful, how he treats the holy things of God, the sacred things that belong in the house of the Lord, and the sacred offices, and that one must not take liberties either by words or by actions, for it is in the hand of God to promote. "God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another" (Psalm 75:6, '7).

The men of Beth-shemesh recognized the power and holiness of God. They cried out, "Who is **le* to stand before this holy LORD God?" Read Psalm 1 and Psalm 15 for the answer.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why was the Ark taken to battle?
- 2 What did the Children of Israel fail to do before going into battle?
- 3 How did the battle end?
- 4 What happened to Eli and his sons?
- 5 What became of the Ark of the Lord?
- 6 What happened to the idol?
- 7 Why did the Philistines return the Ark?
- 8 Why did God smite the men of Beth-shemesh?