

# *Truth for Today*

## **The Bible Explained**

---

For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

**Broadcast:** 10/11 December

**No.:** T1280

**Speaker:** Paul Callicott

---

## **Samuel to King David**

### **The Ark of God Taken -1st Samuel 4**

*[NKJV Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

#### **Introduction**

There are lots of talismans and superstitions in sport, if you look closely. Many are undertaken with the hope that they will bring success to the person performing them. I remember one football manager having a little soft toy at the corner of the technical area of the pitch. He had been given it by a young supporter before a match and the team had gone on to win that game. Following that success, the little toy continued to appear for the next few games. I say the few games because it wasn't long before the manager was sacked and someone new came in!

This thought came to mind because it is a bit like chapter 4 of 1 Samuel that we are going to look at. Clearly there is nothing new under the sun! We can sometimes read parts of the word of God and sit in wonder at the way in which people behaved. This can also be accompanied with the thought that perhaps they were more primitive, and we would never do something like that. This in turn sometimes leads to the thought that these parts of the Bible are, therefore, not relevant to us.

My recollection of a sporting occurrence, if you can call it that, is a very real reminder that older parts of the Bible are still very relevant today. We don't have to look far to see people are making the same mistakes. The notion that a short ritual, or the presence of a particularly shaped inanimate object, can somehow have a bearing on the outcome of a sporting event is bordering on laughable. But despite this, these things are carried out by so many in one way or another. But we can see that it has ever been like this, and our passage is able to give a more pressing indication of the calamity there is in trusting in objects, or rituals, rather than God!

The fourth chapter of 1 Samuel is primarily a narrative, so I am going to give a brief overview of the key events that are covered. Despite this being a narrative there are many lessons to be gained from it, which will make up the main part of this talk before a few concluding thoughts. Given the length of the chapter I will not recite all verses, but pick out a few key ones along the way, but I would encourage everyone listening or reading to read the whole chapter.

#### **Chapter 4 Overview**

It seems reasonable in this case to look at the first verse of 1 Samuel chapter 4. The allocation of chapters and verses in the Bible can sometimes be unhelpful, but in this chapter, I believe there is an ideal demarcation given with the first line which states:

“And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.”

The actual meaning of those words are better understood by saying all that Samuel said would happen to Israel did happen. This is an important point because it verified Samuel as a prophet who was speaking God's truth. There are clear directions, given to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy chapter 18, about how they were to tell if a prophet was actually speaking for God or not. In chapter 3 Samuel was still a boy, so it is important that we see his credentials fully laid out and proven early on the book. Our narrative now gives a detailed account of how the word of the Lord given to Samuel came about as it was revealed to him.

The remaining part of verse 1 with verse 2 describe the scene and the outcome of a battle between the Philistines and Israel. It is remarkable how few words are given to the battle! There are many parts of the Bible where battles are described in great detail. But then most of those were battles where God had been behind the victory and therefore given more space in His word. Here we see that Israel was defeated and the losses given as 4000. Now, with modern eyes we might look at this figure and think that it is not too bad. However, this was a rather devastating loss in the history of battles for Israel. We must remember that there were many instances where Israel didn't have any losses when they went out to battle, usually against much stronger forces. There is an incident in Joshua chapter 7 where they only lost 36 people because of sin in the camp and the people were devastated because they had never known a loss. As a result, a loss of 4000 was a big deal.

The response of the Israelites is then captured in verses three to five. Verse 3 is really a key to understanding the mind of the people of God at that time:

“And when the people had come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, “Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord from Shiloh to us, that when it comes among us it may save us from the hand of our enemies.””

The people of Israel were shocked at the defeat and questioned why God had allowed it. In order to try and rectify the problem, they sent for the Ark of God as their means of bringing God into the battle. This was not a small task as the carrying of the Ark must have taken a day or so to bring to the camp. At this point the two sons of Eli were introduced into the scene. They had no doubt arranged for the Ark to be brought from the Tabernacle. The response of the people at the arrival of the Ark, as captured in verse five, is remarkable. The ground shook following the shout that went up. The Ark had stirred up a fervour in the people that caused the triumphant Philistine army to be concerned.

Verses six to nine then take up the Philistine response to the arrival of the Ark. Unusually the enemies of God, despite an initial fear, were actually galvanised by this occurrence. This led the Philistines to stand up and fight harder rather than the hoped-for effect from the Israelites to weaken their opposing army. The Lord had been able to cause very large armies to be scattered with only a handful of people in other battles. Such verses give us confidence to see that indeed the hand of God was behind the outcome of this battle.

The next two verses conclude the battle and speak of the utter defeat of the Israelites and the loss of the Ark of God:

“So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent. There was a very great slaughter, and there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. Also the ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died” (vv.10-11).

If the first defeat was bad, this was catastrophic. Thirty thousand dead! That is more than most of the armies raised in the book of Judges. The Ark of God was lost, and the priesthood's continuity was seemingly destroyed. Given the state of the people the loss of the Ark was significant in that they looked to the activities of the Tabernacle as a key part of their blessing from God. The physical parts of the priestly rituals were an essential sign to the nation of how they were God's people. The loss of this and the future priests meant all that they clung to had been removed and lost. It left them not only defeated, but also seemingly without identity. Bringing the Ark to the camp had resulted in the opposite outcome that they had hoped for. Despite this rather shocking defeat, the whole battle and the outcomes are only afforded these two verses in the Bible! The remaining eleven verses provide us with a description of what happened when the news was brought of the defeat. Verse twelve tells us that it was a Benjaminite who brought the news of the battle. Jewish tradition suggests that this was no other than Saul, having wrestled the ten commandments from Goliath's hand before fleeing to tell the news. This is not chronologically credible. However, let us consider some chronology, 1 Samuel follows on from Judges and the

last thing we hear of in that book is regarding the terrible sin committed by the men of Benjamin, the subsequent war with the rest of Israel and their efforts to deal with the aftermath. This gives us a good insight into the state of the nation at this time. There had been very little progress made since that time and it almost seems as if this is showing us that the whole nation is associated with the same state as Benjamin was at the end of the book of Judges.

Eli had been waiting for news of the outcome of the battle and had greatly feared for the Ark of God. It seems he could not prevent it being taken from the Tabernacle and so had dreaded the outcome. Alas the news was the catalyst for his death, and the horrific end that he came to is recorded in verse 18. Perhaps the reference to him being a large man shows us that the role he held was more serving himself than the God he was supposed to be working for. However, it is worth noting that it was the loss of the Ark, rather than the death of his sons, that caused the initial fall from his seat.

Finally, there is the story given of Eli's daughter-in-law. This is a sad story where an expectant mother has labour brought on early because of these events and then later dies following the birth. Her statement is profound and surprising as it clearly shows that there was some understanding in this woman of the seriousness of what had occurred, and of how God was dealing with His people at that time. Let us consider all of those involved in this scene. There might have been a word from the leader of Israel's army or the triumphant Philistines or some other key player. Instead, the chapter closes with the accurate spiritual insight of someone who would normally be considered insignificant. Verse 22 closes the chapter with her words:

“And she said, “The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.””

### **The Lessons about God**

Now that we know what happened, we can turn to the lessons that we can take away. Unlike the people of Israel in our chapter, I am going to start with God and consider some of the lessons about Him in this passage. Despite Him rarely being mentioned and never sought after, He was still very clearly working in this chapter to achieve His aims. I have five things I therefore want to look at:

Firstly, God is in control. The first few words of the chapter demonstrate how Samuel was being validated as a prophet in this book. However, a prophet is someone who declares the word of God. Therefore, as well as validating Samuel, it confirms that this was what God had planned and we can see that throughout the chapter. It was no accident that the sons of Eli were brought in at the second battle where their demise occurred. It could only have been God who strengthened the Philistines because most other armies would have been frightened by the news of the Ark of God arriving at Israel's camp. It was also no accident that it was a Benjaminite who brought the news of the defeat. These are some of the things we can see in our chapter that show how God was indeed working out His purposes in these events.

The second lesson is that God will do what He has determined to do. It had been declared by God in the previous chapter that Eli and his sons would no longer be used by God as the high priests due to the sin of the sons and Eli's failure to check their behaviour. This had been declared years before this event and people may have started to think that it was not going to happen. I have no doubt that the sons of Eli thought so. It may have been difficult to see how God would achieve their removal. Nevertheless in a few short days all that God had declared came to pass. This is a very specific example, but there is also the general picture. The spiritual state of Israel was not good, and God was nowhere near the place of honour that He should have had. Warnings were given in the books of Numbers and Joshua about the consequences of failing to do the things that God had commanded the nation. But years had passed without any real cause for concern, so the people probably had begun to believe that God would not carry out the punishment for their failure to comply. Here though, we see that any delay in judgement is actually mercy and grace, and God will always do what He has said He will do.

We come now to the third point which is that God does judge. Although this point in many respects covers the same ground as the previous one, it is still worth making. We have a righteous God who will judge righteously. We cannot expect God to allow sin to go unpunished where there is clearly no repentance. The Israelites believed that God would deliver them no matter what because they were still the people of God. We see here a reminder that included in the plans of God, and the control He has over this world, is His need to judge sin whenever and wherever it is present.

The fourth lesson is that God will not be used or be led by men. I actually think that this is one of the key lessons from this passage as it was the great mistake that Israel made. When the first defeat occurred, they realised that God had not been with them and had allowed them to be defeated. Rather than turning to Him, they attempted to force God's hand. There appears to be the belief that God would have to deliver them because He couldn't possibly allow the Ark of God to be captured. This attitude stemmed from a misunderstanding of who God is, an attitude which we can all suffer from. It is the same attitude that has led to the multitude of gods that we see across the world for every conceivable thing. The idea that we can mould a god to our convenience. But this is not the case with the Living God. We are not to attempt to conform Him to our requirements; we must be bent to His will and purpose. We see this here. They thought that God would not let the Ark be captured, but that is exactly what He did and none of it resulted in any deviation from his plans. We cannot bend God to our will!

Finally in this section, we can see that God does not need us. I am delving into other speaker's territory here, but this point is also based on a knowledge of what is to come in the next chapters of Samuel. The story of the Ark's journey back to Israel is a great read. The Ark was lost at the cost of thirty-four thousand men. God brings it back without anyone else being needed at all. The mind of the people was that somehow, they were great because they were the people of the Living God. In their equation, they had concluded that they were therefore special in themselves, that their situation was necessary to the standing of God in the world and universe. Again, there was probably a throwback to some of Moses' prayers for the people about his concern for the name of God to the nations around if He allowed Israel to be destroyed. But Moses' statements were from a genuine concern for the glory of God, whereas those in our chapter today are from a basis that the people believed they were necessary to God. We can see from this chapter and subsequent chapters that God has no need of our help in anything. We are simply here to be His people and to serve Him, responding to His direction and guidance. We should marvel at the fact that despite Him having no need for us, He does love us and has a keen interest in our everyday lives. Eli the high priest and his family had been destroyed, but God still had His man in Samuel who would do great things. This defeat also had no bearing on the Lord being able to bring His king to the throne and thus set in motion the chain of events that would lead to a son of David being the eternal King of the nation of Israel. God achieves His plans and what a privilege it is to be able to be a small part of that.

### **The Lessons for Ourselves**

We now turn to some practical lessons for ourselves. I have three areas I want to look at. There are parallels to some of the previous lessons about God and they are such that they show the barriers that hinder us being able to fully allow God to work in our lives.

The first point is that we need to ensure that God is our guide and not ourselves. I read verse three of our chapter because I thought it highlighted this point. There was recognition in the verse that God had not been with them. In the past this would have brought the people back to God but not on this occasion. God was not with them, so they tried to bring God to them by themselves. There was no recognition of their own failure or sin, just an amazement that God had not given them the victory. Their own self-belief had relegated God to an optional extra in their lives. Is this not a problem for so many in this world? They want a god that suits them, works at their level. You can even say this of those who don't believe in God. The removal of God from the equation allows us to be number one and make all the decisions about how we live our lives. But this is not how it should be for the Christian. Salvation requires this mindset to be put aside as we acknowledge our

sin and our need for the Lord to save us. The challenge comes in ensuring this continues in our walk. How much we have to check ourselves. It is easy to fall into the trap of planning our lives and then just expecting God to rubber stamp our decisions. I have known people who are so surprised that they have not been given everything they have hoped for from God, yet they had never really made much time for Him in their grand plans. This chapter serves as a good reminder of the possible consequences of planning our lives without first bringing God into everything.

Following on from this is the recognition that obedience is better than zeal or enthusiasm. There are so many things done in this chapter that were not done in line with the commands of God, which had been clearly laid down in the books of Exodus and Numbers. There had been many things that were not being done correctly in the years prior to the battle. The shout that went up when the Ark arrived was a response that would probably make most people think that this was a people clearly in tune with God. But it was not so. Enthusiasm and zeal are not sinful things, but without obedience to the ways of God preceding them, they will not be able to carry the victory. This is backed up in the New Testament when the Lord speaks of those who will say that they did this or that in His name, but He never knew them – the essence of Matthew chapter 7 verses 21 to 23. Israel's efforts to bring the Ark to the battle and their shout of victory ended with an even worse defeat because they were resting on their own strength and the strength of an object, without looking to God Himself.

Our trust should be in the living God. In our chapter we see that the nation of Israel was still using the Tabernacle and going through many of the sacrificial processes that were to be carried out. Many were not done properly, and the priests were not behaving as they should, but the system was there. It was so engrained that it had actually become the thing that the people looked to, with the Ark the pinnacle of that priesthood system. I heard recently that Eli showed that he did have some concern still, despite his failures. There is some truth in this, but I can't help but feel it wasn't as it should have been. His concern was for the Ark of God, but what about God himself? Sure, the Ark was important to them, but God had done wonders well before it had even been described to Moses. The system set up by God had become more important than the God to whom it was supposed to facilitate worship. The loss of the Ark was seen as a heavy blow and there is truth in that, but God had not changed, as He shows in the following chapters. We can also look at other books of the Bible like Daniel and see how God delivered His faithful people where there was no Ark in sight. Let us be mindful not to be impressed with the resources God gives more than we are impressed with the Provider.

All of these things that I have looked at can be summed up by the thought that God was not being given His rightful place. He is to be front and centre, first and foremost, and have first priority in our lives in every way. Our chapter is a reminder of the dangers of forgetting this and of giving precedence to other things over God.

## **Conclusion**

I have come to the end of my available time on this subject. 1 Samuel 4 is a fascinating chapter in the Bible and there are many things we can learn from it, I have only been able to cover a few of them. I trust that my thoughts on it have been of help to those who are listening or reading this. What a reminder this chapter is of the sovereignty of God and how He requires our obedience to His ways, and for us to seek His guidance and will in our lives.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on 1 Samuel Chapter 4, The Ark of God Taken, talk number T1280.

---

## **Please Note:**

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.