

# Why the Church is Losing the Culture Battle

*3-Year Bible Reading Plan*

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This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of 1 Samuel 4. Now if you're a guest or visitor with us this morning, you may be wondering what was the rationale behind 1 Samuel 4. Well, we find ourselves as a family of faith about halfway through a three year Bible reading plan. I know there's many plans out there to read the Bible in a year and such and those are wonderful, however as a body of believers we're just walking through the Scriptures typically about one chapter a day, and maybe you're one who has never been a part of it, let me encourage you to do so, maybe you've gotten behind or it's been a rough couple of weeks, don't worry about playing catch-up, just fall in line where the Bible reading plan is. Here's what I've learned over the years, that it doesn't matter if you're in the Old Testament or the New, it doesn't matter if you're in a familiar passage or one you've never read before, more often than not when you come to the Lord with a pure heart and a willing spirit, whatever that passage is it will apply to whatever you're walking through in life, and such is today.

The book of 1 Samuel 4, we find ourselves with the account of a battle that took place thousands of years ago, a battle between the Israelites and that famous foe, the Philistines. Now I'm not gonna read every single verse of 1 Samuel 4 for the sake of time, but I want you to have it opened because we're gonna go back and strategically look at these verses in just a moment but allow me for time's sake just to recount chapter 4 of the book of 1 Samuel.

The Israelites and their archenemies the Philistines are at war. The battle takes place and the Israelites lose 4,000 men, 4,000 men die in one day. They go back to their base camp and they're upset, rightfully so. They've got to share news with family members and they decide that they cannot let this happen again. So what do they do? They decide that it would be a good idea to get the ark of the covenant, that which represented the presence of God, that which represented the power of God, that which went before them when they crossed the river Jordan. It should rightfully now go behind the battle that was lost. They began to celebrate. The Philistines began to get scared. Basically the Philistines say, "There's no way we can defeat their God. There's no way that if the ark of the covenant shows up we can ever win, so fight as if it's your last day."

The next day the battle ensues. This time they don't lose 4,000, the Israelites lose 30,000 men. Two days, 34,000 lives lost. The ark of the covenant actually gets captured by the Philistines. Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of the high priest Eli, are killed. News gets back to Eli. He's 98 years old. The Bible says he's sitting on a ledge. When he hears the news that the ark has been captured and that his sons are dead, he falls over, the Bible says because he was heavy, his neck broke. Word gets to Phinehas' wife who was about to give birth to a child. The ark of the covenant was captured, her father-in-law was dead, her husband was dead, her brother-in-law was dead, and she then goes into the travail of giving birth and when the child is born, she names it Ichabod which means the glory of the Lord is departed.

It's a story of a battle that should have been fought with great ease like others before, but turned much the opposite, not just the death of the 34,000 and the sons of Eli and himself, but a declaration that no longer did the glory of the Lord reside among the Israelite people. That is the account of a battle that took place some 3,000+ years ago, but allow me to conjecture that it's also a battle that's taking place in your lives right now. You see, the story of this battle isn't just about them, it's about us, and when I say "us," it's about us as individuals, it's about us as family units, and as we're gonna see today, it's really about us as a collective body of believers in this context. In fact, I want to address an issue today that I do not enjoy speaking of nor do I relish in communicating, but I want to talk about why the church is losing the cultural battle. Why are we on the defensive? Why are we being consistently out-numbered and out-voiced? What we're gonna see in our lives is the same as the Israelites' lives, it was not that the Philistines were so good at what they did, it's that the Israelites were so wrong in how they responded to the Lord. So today the battle is your battle, it is my battle, it is our battle, and I want to see why is it that in this context and in this culture you and I seem to be losing the cultural battle.

Well, it begins because we have done much like the Israelites, we've decided that it is best to position ourselves for power rather than to position ourselves in prayer. Now notice the first two verses. It may not seem like much of a discourse but read it with me. It says,

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.

Now it just sounds like a simple account of a battle gone wrong, correct? Turn a few pages to the right to the book of 1 Samuel 17. I want you to see one of the most famous battles not only in the history of Israel but in the history of the world. This is that famous David and Goliath battle.

Now verse 1 of 1 Samuel 17 has nothing to do with David. He hasn't shown up on the scene yet, in fact, Goliath is not even mentioned. I want you to see the difference in this famous battle that went Israel's way versus the one we just read about. Verse 1, it says,

1 Now the Philistines gathered together their armies to battle, and were gathered together at Shochoh, which belongeth to Judah, and pitched between Shochoh and Azekah, in Ephesdammim. 2 And Saul and the men of Israel were gathered together, and pitched by the valley of Elah, and set the battle in array against the Philistines.

Now it sounded much the same except there's one dramatic difference: in the book of 1 Samuel 17, even David said it later, the Philistines picked the fight. The Philistines actually went onto Israel's territory and said, "We want your land." The Israelites responded with a famous victory that was at the hands of David and his stones that were slinging.

Now go back to chapter 4. Who picked the fight? The Israelites did. The Israelites picked the fight and here's what's interesting, is they go and they settle in Ebenezer which, by the way, wouldn't be named that for 30 more years until that famous story that takes place, and the Philistines were in Aphek, and I don't expect you to completely grasp the geography here but allow me to explain it. Imagine a vertical line of demarcation on a clock from 12 to 6 right down the middle. Ebenezer would've been at 1 o'clock position and Aphek would've been at the 11 o'clock position. The Philistines had not invaded their territory, the Philistines for all intents and purposes may have been wrong, they may have been idolaters, they may have been heathens but they were minding their own business and the Israelites for some reason panicked that something bad might go awry and they decided we can't have them this close to us, let's eliminate them, and what happened was they positioned themselves for power thinking they had to handle things rather than position themselves in prayer and letting the Lord take care of it much like they would later in chapter 17.

How is this played out in our culture? How does this relate to you and I today? I want to take you back at least in our culture to one of the most famous events in our history. Roughly 100 years ago an event changed everything. The event changed our culture. It most definitively changed our education system. It's called the Scopes Monkey Trial where it pitted biblical creationism against Darwinian evolution. Now you may not know the "real story" but it was declared a mistrial later. There was no verdict actually given in the trial but you and I both know that perception is oftentimes reality, and the perception was that those that are argued "science's case" definitively defeated the biblical creation story. And today we have a world where professors and teachers are literally expelled from their position because they dare advocate what the Scriptures might say that goes back 100 years ago in a courtroom in Dayton, Tennessee.

What you may not know is what led to that famous trial. There was a State Representative in the state of Tennessee by the name of Butler and Butler had a lot of family members who were spread throughout the state, and one year over a break one of

his family members brought the student manual from the University of Tennessee for him to see. It seems like a simple thing, right? Except that he opened it up and found out that in those days at the University of Tennessee you as a professor were allowed academic freedom, you could either teach biblical creationism or Darwinian evolution or a combination of either. It was up to the professor.

Now you and I think about that today and go, "Well, that's not such a bad deal." Right? Well, Mr. Butler thought it was a horrible deal. Why would we even make allowances for anything that was contrary to Scripture? So he wrote a bill into the state of Tennessee legislature that later became known as the Butler Act that forbid anybody in the educational system that was funded by the state of Tennessee to teach anything but biblical creationism. Do you dare want to guess at how many professors at the University of Tennessee were teaching evolution in those days? The answer is zero. Not one professor was teaching what he was scared they might propagate. He did exactly what the Israelites did, "Oh, if they cross the border, it'll never work out."

How often do we as believers see the enemy on the other side of the border? We see what the devil's doing over there and we decide, "You know what we need to do? We need to take over. We need to rewrite the rules. We need to change this, we need to change that because we cannot dare let them come across." Can I share the antithesis? The early apostles in the book of Acts, they were being not only were they becoming a pawn but they were being persecuted, they were almost on the doorsteps of being martyred, they'd already been put in jail in chapter 3 and 4 and in chapter 4 when they get out of jail, a group of them get together and say, "What do we do?" None of them said, "Let's take over." None of them said, "Let's rewrite it." None of them said, "Let's do this, let's do that." Do you know what they did? They called a prayer meeting and they called out to God and in chapter 4, verse 31 it says, "When they prayed the building shook, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and they spoke the word of God with boldness." One of the struggles that we're having in our culture as believers today is we think that the answer is placing entities in power when our real power is really upon our knees.

It's interesting in 1 Timothy 2, it says it doesn't matter if they're kings, rulers or whoever they may be, that we need to pray for them. You know that means not just praying for the ones you voted for, right? It means praying for all of them. What's interesting is when you read that chapter of the Bible what we're supposed to pray for. It says that we pray that we have a quiet and peaceable life. In other words, as a believer in Jesus Christ, it doesn't matter who's in office, it doesn't matter what the "rules" are, we ought to pray, "God, in spite of them and in spite of those, may we be able to live our lives for you as we do so according to Scripture." We have countless examples in our own history of you and I doing exactly what the Israelites did. "Oh, that might occur and what if this and what about that?" So we pick a fight. The problem is just like you see on tv at a football game, whoever throws the first punch is usually the one who gets laid out, and the same thing is happening our lives today. Our real power, folks, isn't in gaining power, our real power is in hitting our knees. It worked in the first century and it ought to work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

But there's a second issue taking place here. I want to fast forward to verse 4 of chapter 4. It says,

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.

Now if you've read through the book of 1 Samuel, particularly chapter 2, you would have to question to yourself of all the people we've got, why are Hophni and Phinehas the ones carrying the ark? Allow me to recap chapter 2. These guys were the physical descendants of their dad who was the priest, but they had no business administrating holy things. In fact, they were guilty of two main improprieties. Number one was this, that when people would bring their sacrifices, they were in it for the money, they were in it for the fame, and they took advantage of people and used their position and their name against them. Secondly, the Bible says that they were congregating in a very intimate sense with the women at the temple. Not a good scenario. This what we know as ark of the covenant, is the power of God, it's the presence of God, and that's the best we've got to carry it? You see, not only have we positioned ourselves for power rather than prayer, oftentimes we have promoted people based on their popularity rather than their personal character in righteousness.

How many times are we drawn to promote or extol those who are able to garnish large crowds? Those who have the right last name? Those who have a history and a lineage? Those who know somebody who knows somebody? In fact, it's very rare that you will see anything with the phrase "bestseller" on it from a nobody in our context. When's the last time you went and saw a bestselling book that was of a "Christian flare" and you said, "I've never heard of that person"? Oftentimes there are those that have attained our celebrity status. You know, we're real quick for celebrities, are we not? We're a celebrity culture. You don't believe me, just watch tv. We've got folks who are "celebrities" that are promoting and pushing everything and we think just because you're famous and you're rich, we ought to listen to what you have to say.

Now throughout time and every single one of us in this room has seen this. We get excited, and don't get me wrong, we should. The Bible says in Luke 15 when any person, anybody, it doesn't matter if they're great or small, if any single person repents of their sin and believes on Jesus Christ as their Savior, the heavens rejoice, the angels rejoice and we should rejoice. It doesn't matter who they are, where they came from, how many commas they've got in their income statement, anybody who gets saved, we ought to celebrate that. But here's the thing I struggle with and I think we have suffered from: why is it that we think that we need a celebrity who is saved to validate our faith? That somehow if we can get somebody famous to speak on the faith, to sing on the faith, to do anything, that somehow that does us well? Last time I checked, Jesus didn't call any famous people to be his disciples. Last time I checked, those who the Lord used to grow the early church did not have the names that rang with popularity. In fact, the Bible says

in 1 Corinthians 1 he uses the base things of this world because oftentimes those with fame and fortune just keep on walking by.

But we're guilty of this. We're more interested in somebody with celebrity status fighting our battles for us – by the way, when you get to chapter 8, that's exactly what the Israelites wanted with a king. We're willing to give up our family, we're willing to give up our resources if he will fight our battles for us. And yet we see that the world was turned upside down by the early church by the name of a man, Jason. Have you ever heard of Jason before? Neither had I until I read that chapter. No last name given. No lineage. No pedigree. He wasn't a celebrity. He was just a person living his life for the Lord and the Lord used him to turn the world upside down.

We position ourselves for power, we promote based on popularity rather than personal character, and here's number three, we do the same thing the Israelites did, we want to protect our reputation rather than purge out our sin. In fact, when you get down to verse 5 and following, it says that the Israelites go back to camp and they get the ark of the covenant. Now this is where the story takes a twist because it is this ark of the covenant that when it went before them in days past exhibited great power, great presence, and incredible results, but why not in this case? Why did it lead to 30,000 deaths? Why did it lead to being captured? Why did it lead to Ichabod being said? Because when they went back to camp, there's no record at all that anybody said, "We messed up." There's no record at all, "We have sinned. We have violated the precepts of God." What they basically said is, "You know what? It didn't work well. Let's use this box as a good luck charm because God has to win now." I've got news for you: the Lord will not bless our disobedience. He will not take our sordid protective lives and somehow give us the victory that we know we don't deserve. That's exactly what happened here and so they bring the ark of the covenant and 30,000 die.

Let me give you a personal story here. It's the same story as David and Bathsheba. Remember the Bible says in 2 Samuel that David was supposed to go to war but he stayed at home. You see, it's the same story as the Israelites, they should have never gone into battle but they did. David should've never been home but he was. So what happened? He saw Bathsheba on the roof, he decided to entertain her and her company, and the next thing we know he found himself in a world of trouble, did he not? There was a child that was expected and it wasn't by the expected father. Did he confess his sin? No. Did he own up to it? Absolutely not. He did the same thing the Israelites did, instead of going and getting the ark of the covenant, he said, "Go get her husband. Get her husband, bring him in and that should solve this issue." The only problem was like the ark of the covenant, Bathsheba's husband was righteous in the Lord. So what did David do? He covered his sin. He had him killed so he could expedite a wedding.

It's the same story on a personal level that we have here on a corporate level, that we're real apt to covering our "sin" and not dealing with it and purging it. Where do you see anywhere in the Bible where it says, "Cover it up. Pretend it didn't happen." No, the Bible says deal with it. It's no fun but we've got to deal with this and it took Nathan coming along and saying, "David, let me give you a little story here. Say there's a man with 100

sheep and he steals one from another, what do you do to that other? He persecutes him," he says, "and you are the man." Now thankfully David's heart was sensitive to the Spirit's leading when Nathan arrived, but how many casualties took place between that night with Bathsheba and Nathan's conversation? How did the nation of Israel go wayward? Because they were more interested in protecting their reputation than dealing with sin.

I won't go into details nor will I give explicit examples, but how many more days do we need to wake up to another church related scandal where somewhere somebody has covered sin for a long time so as not to lose their position, their popularity, when what we should have done was purge that sin? You know that's what happens in 1 Corinthians 5? When sin is discovered, it says let's purge this so that we don't protect the sin.

Last but not least, this is where it could get a little fun. Go to verse 21, to the end of the story. It says that she, this is Phinehas' wife, after all that's taken place,

21 And she named the child Ichabod, saying, The glory is departed from Israel: because the ark of God was taken, and because of her father in law and her husband.

Do you find it interesting the order in which she's upset about things? We would've expected her to say, "My husband's gone, my father-in-law's gone, oh, and by the way, the ark is gone." Oh, no, no, no, no. Her distress is because the power and the presence of God is gone and, yes, she is upset about her family.

How does that relate today? Not only do we oftentimes collectively position for power rather than prayer, we promote based on popularity versus personal character and righteousness, we often desire to protect our reputation than purge sin, here's the last but not least, we have a tendency to facilitate programs rather than the presence of God. Let me lay that out for you: we go through the motions, we check off the boxes, we cross the t's, we dot the i's. A. W. Tozer not only a great speaker but writer of days past who focused primarily on the concept of prayer, made this statement and if this doesn't send a tingle down your spine, you've fallen asleep. He says quite quickly that if the Holy Spirit left a church, 95% of their programs would keep on going. Think about that for a moment. Just let that sink in that all the trappings and all the schedules, all the events just keep on rolling even if the Holy Spirit left. Vance Havner, an evangelist of days gone by, strategically within the Southern Baptist Convention made this statement. This is about us collectively. He said if the Holy Spirit left the Southern Baptist Convention, nobody would notice for 10 years. We just keep on rolling. We just keep on doing. We just keep on showing up, keep on checking the boxes.

You see, what happened in the Israelites' life is they had all the programs, they had the guys in the right positions, they had the right box, they had this, they had that, but they didn't realize that they no longer had the presence and the power of God in their lives and Phinehas' wife declares what no one else was willing to admit, the glory of God has departed. This is not just a lesson for the Israelites, it's not just a lesson for our culture, it's a lesson for each and every one of us. Which side of this story do we find ourselves on?

The other side of chapter 4 where the Israelites were doing it the right way, or on the backside of chapter 4 where we've gotten things backwards?

You know, I had a privilege this week. I consider it a privilege anytime I have this opportunity. I had the privilege to address a group of elite athletes, high school football team, before their big playoff game that night. And I came in and I did what I normally do and I hopefully inspired and challenged those young men and even the coaches that were present, but I want to share with you what challenged me that day. It wasn't what I said, it's what the coach said as the benediction to what I said. He made this statement to those young men and I don't know if the young men heard it but I know I did. He said there's two things in life that'll never lie to you: the Bible and a mirror. Hurts, doesn't it? It doesn't matter what social media says about you. It doesn't matter what your friends say about you. When you stand in the mirror and you look yourself eyeball-to-eyeball, you know who you are.

How easy is it today to go, "Oh, I know some folks that are 1 Samuel 4 people. This must be about them and this must be about those." Can I ask you today to do something that may be hard? We know the Bible doesn't lie to us but neither does the mirror. Maybe today as we come to our time of response you'd be saying, "Alright, God, I need to look you eyeball-to-eyeball and I need to see if I've fallen in the same trap in my life. I use you as a good luck charm. I bring you in after the fact. I get caught up in the celebrity syndrome." Would you be willing today to look yourself in the mirror? The Israelites weren't willing to but we all desperately need to.