

And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.

Some think that the first line of verse 1 belongs properly to chapter 3.
After all, there is no other reference to Samuel in chapter 4.

But this is why I preached on 1 Samuel 4-7 in a single sermon last time!
If you turn over to chapter 7, verse 3,
we hear *how* the word of Samuel came to all Israel.
“And Samuel said to all the house of Israel,
“if you are returning to the LORD with all your heart,
then put away the foreign gods...”

And then notice chapter 7, verse 12,
“Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen
and called its name *Ebenezer*, for he said,
‘Till now the LORD has helped us.’”

In chapter 4, there are the two battles of Ebenezer –
where the LORD fought against Israel –
and Samuel is silent.

In chapter 7, Samuel will finally speak (many years later) –
and a new Ebenezer will be established (many miles away from the Ebenezer of ch 4).

We’re going to take three weeks to work through these chapters –
because I think I rushed it last time!

You often hear people tell the story of the song “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing”
with an emphasis on 1 Samuel 7:
“see, Samuel sets up a stone and says that the LORD has been our help!!”
(Eben-ezer means “stone of help.”)

But how often have you heard about the *first* Ebenezer in chapter 4?!
We hear about the Ebenezer *with Samuel* in chapter 7.
But Samuel himself is referencing the Ebenezer of chapter 4 –
the Ebenezer *without Samuel*.

Too often we want to fast-forward to the end of the story –
“Let’s get to the happy ending!!”

But the only way to get to the Ebenezer *with Samuel* – where God *helps* his people –
is by living through the first Ebenezer – without Samuel –
where God abandoned his people (or so it seemed!) –

where the glory of the LORD departed.

What God was teaching Samuel – and what God is teaching us –
is that the only way that God can help his people
is for God himself to veil his glory –
and to bear upon himself the wrath and curse of our sin –
and thus to triumph over all of his and our enemies!

There is no way to glory except the way of the cross.
There is no ascent into heaven except through the descent into hell.

1. Ebenezer without Samuel: The Capture of the Ark (v1-11)

a. The First Battle of Ebenezer: Helpless Israel (v1-2)

Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. ² The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle.

“Here I raise my Ebenezer”

How did an obscure location in 1 Samuel
become part of one of the most famous hymns of the church?

Tonight we are looking at Ebenezer (stone of help) and Ichabod (no glory).
Ebenezer opens chapter 4 and closes chapter 7,
while Ichabod well describes the condition of Israel.

As we saw last time, the Word of the LORD was rare in those days,
there was no frequent vision,
and Eli’s eyesight was growing dim.

In chapter 3, the ark of God was still in the temple,
and the lamp of God had not yet gone out.

But all that is changing.

No longer is Eli’s eyesight dim.
He is now blind (4:15).
He is a blind man watching at the gate.
And no longer is the ark of the LORD in the temple–
the elders of Israel have brought the ark out to the battle.

b. The Ark Brought to Ebenezer: Faithless Israel (v3-9)

i. The Danger of Magical Thinking (v3-4)

³ *And when the people came to 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 here from Shiloh, that it^[a] may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.”⁴ So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

The elders of Israel are thinking of the ark as a magical talisman:

*Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh,
that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies. (4:3)*

I call it “magical thinking” – but we need to be careful not to dismiss what they see!

They were right, you know.

By bringing the ark of the covenant of the LORD into the camp,
they *were* bringing the power of God into the camp.
The coming of the ark did signal the coming of God into the camp.

In the days of Joshua this resulted in the victory of Israel at Jericho,
as the ark of the covenant went before them into battle.

And in the time of the Judges, in the days of Phineas – the son of Eleazar – the son of Aaron –
the people of God inquired of the LORD at Bethel
(for the ark of the covenant of God was there).

And the LORD was with Israel as they brought judgment upon Benjamin (Judges 20).

And now there is another Phineas!

Phineas the son of Eli (probably the several times great-grandson of the other Phineas!).
When Israel was defeated before Benjamin,
they inquired of the LORD through Phineas – and the ark of the covenant –
and the LORD was with them, and they triumphed!!

So why call it magical thinking?

Because in the days of the first Phineas, Israel sat there before the LORD
“and fasted that day until evening, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings
before the LORD.” (Judges 20:26).

And they inquired of the LORD asking whether they should go up –
or whether they should cease.

In other words, in the days of the first Phineas in Judges 20,
the people of God wanted to know and do *what God says*.

In the days of the second Phineas in 1 Samuel 4,
the people want God to know and do *what they say*.

And that's what defines magical thinking.
How do we get God to do what we want?

This is at the heart of pagan theology.
Pagan theology is all about how to manipulate the gods to do what you want.

1 Samuel 4 shows that Israel has adopted pagan thinking.
But it also shows us the *truth* of what *really happened*:

Listen to the language of 4:4
*So the people sent to Shiloh
and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts,
who is enthroned on the cherubim.*
Indeed, when the ark came to the camp, God himself came.

This *is* the ark of the covenant of Yahweh of hosts –
the one who is enthroned on the cherubim.

And so God himself came to Ebenezer (literally, the stone of help).
You've probably heard preachers point to 1 Samuel 7 when explaining "ebenezer"
but we need to start with 1 Samuel 4.

ii. The (futile) Power of Magical Thinking (v5)

⁵ *As soon as the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded.*

Israel brought the ark to Ebenezer because they were seeking God's help.
"Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by thy help I'm come!"

Israel is singing this here in 1 Samuel 4.
Israel is not following other gods.
Israel is trusting in Yahweh to save them!
Will God be a rock of help to them?
Will he be their sure fortress?

But Israel did not consider the problem.
They had asked, "Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines?"
But they did not stop to think about what God had said.
God had said in Deuteronomy 28:25,
that if they did not obey the voice of the LORD,
then "The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies."

But Israel does not consider the possibility that they may have sinned against God.
This is our problem as well!

We tend to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt –
so we don't usually consider the possibility that we may be at fault.
We are good Christians!
Right?
And so we just assume that God is on our side –
and if we just do all the right things (at the moment –
never mind the past...)
then God will rescue us.

But what if God is *not* on your side?!
This is a sobering thought.
What if I am wrong?

iii. The (futile) Power of non-Magical Thinking (v6-9)

⁶ And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, "What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" And when they learned that the ark of the LORD had come to the camp, ⁷ the Philistines were afraid, for they said, "A god has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. ⁸ Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness.

Now the Philistines hear all this shouting –
and when they learn that the ark of the LORD has come into the camp –
they were afraid!

Because they have heard of the god of Israel!
A god has come into the camp!
Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before.
Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods?
And they had heard of what Yahweh did for Israel:
These are the gods who struck the Egyptians
with every sort of plague in the wilderness.

The Philistines had been fighting the Egyptians –
(it's part of the story of the Late Bronze Age collapse –
the Philistines seem to be the refugees from Anatolia – modern day Turkey;
maybe not the refugees from the Trojan War –
but collateral damage from the same conflicts).
And at some point in the recent past, the Egyptians had made a treaty with the Philistines
that gave the Philistines the coastland of Canaan,
so long as the Philistines promised not to hassle Egypt anymore.

So the Philistines weren't around when Israel *left* Egypt –
but they have heard the stories of what Yahweh did to Egypt.

But what neither Israel nor the Philistines understood was that the coming of God
is not necessarily a good thing for his people!
Because in fact, the LORD came in judgment against the house of Eli
and against all Israel for their sin.

And yet the Philistines do not think that they are necessarily doomed:

*⁹ Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have
been to you; be men and fight.*”

In one sense, they don't engage in “magical” thinking.

At least in what our author reports, they seem to take a very “rational” stance:
“be men and fight!”

I would suggest that our author does this in order to ridicule Israel,
more than praise the Philistines –
we'll see that clearly in chapters 5-6.

But it's worth pointing out that the “rational” thinking of the Philistines
is just as futile as the “magical” thinking of Israel.

Sure – the Philistines win the battle.

But as we'll see next week – that victory only brings them under God's judgment!

Rational thinking is no better than magical thinking.

Trusting in our own reason and strength
is just as bad as trusting in our ability to manipulate God.

What is needed – and what we will finally see in chapter *seven!* –
is to ‘return to the LORD with all your heart’ (7:3).

What is needed – to use Paul's phrase from Philippians 2 –
is the mind of Christ!

Or – to demonstrate that this is really the point of our text,
we could use Hannah's phrase from 1 Samuel 2 –

“There is none holy like the LORD;
there is none besides you;
there is no rock like our God.

Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the LORD is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.” (2:2-3)

Magical thinking doesn't work.

Rational thinking doesn't work.

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” (Prov 3:5, 6)

c. The Second Battle of Ebenezer: Ark-less Israel (v10-11)

¹⁰ So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. ¹¹ And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

But in the second battle of Ebenezer,
the stone of help once again crushed the Israelites.

The LORD turned his face against his people.

There was a very great slaughter.

30,000 foot soldiers of Israel fell.

(We have often seen that the biblical historians use numbers as a way of communicating how significant the event was.

At the end of the book of Judges, we hear that Israel killed 25,000 men of the tribe of Benjamin – nearly obliterating the whole tribe.

We’ve already seen that the two stories are connected by the two Phineas’s – so when this says that 30,000 men fell – that means that this was a bigger catastrophe than that.)

And the next line shows why:

“the ark of God was captured” –

Oh, and by the way, the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phineas, died.

Exactly what the man of God had predicted.

Exactly what the word of LORD had said to Samuel.

2. Shiloh without a Priest: The Death of Eli (v12-22)

a. A Weighty Man [Cabel] Falls: The Capture of the Ark Matters More Than the Death of His Sons (v12-18)

¹² A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head. ¹³ When he arrived, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God.

Verse 12 takes us back to Shiloh,

where Eli was sitting at the gate of the city,
watching.

The blind man is watching,

for though blind, he sees more clearly than the elders of Israel,
and his heart trembled for the ark of God.

His priorities are in the right place.

He knows better than to think that the ark is a magical talisman!

Our author slows the narrative down to a crawl:

And when the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out. ¹⁴ When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, “What is this uproar?” Then the man hurried and came and told Eli. ¹⁵ Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set so that he could not see.

Once again we are reminded of Eli’s blindness.

¹⁶ And the man said to Eli, “I am he who has come from the battle; I fled from the battle today.” And he said, “How did it go, my son?”

Eli failed.

God judged him because he honored his sons more than he honored his God.

And yet it seems to me that Eli did repent of this,
because his response to the news is the response of faith:

Israel has fled before the Philistines and there has also been a great defeat among the people.

This is bad.

Your two sons also, Hophni and Phineas, are dead,

This is tragic.

and the ark of God has been captured.

The news of Israel’s defeat is disheartening.

The news of his sons death is heartbreaking.

But he could live through that.

Eli already knew that God would kill both of his sons in a single day.

But the ark?

Brothers and sisters, Eli knew as well as you
that God does not *physically* reside in the tabernacle.

But the ark was the physical demonstration of God’s presence with his people.

For God to remove the ark from the land
is for God to say “you are no longer my people.”

(I’m really glad that Pastor Pinegar is preaching through Hosea right now –
because there are so many connections between Samuel and Hosea.
The catastrophe at Ebenezer – and the departure of the glory from Shiloh –
is very much in Hosea’s mind as he reflects on what God is doing in his own day.)

But here – for Eli – the death of his sons was but the just judgment of God.
The capture of the ark of God is as a death knell to his heart.

¹⁸ As soon as he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years.

But then, in verse 19, the scene shifts again.

b. Ichabod: The Capture of the Ark Matters More Than the Death of Her Husband (v19-22)

¹⁹ Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. And when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. ²⁰ And about the time of her death the women attending her said to her, “Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son.” But she did not answer or pay attention. ²¹ And she named the child Ichabod, saying, “The glory has departed^[b] from Israel!” because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. ²² And she said, “The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.”

Because Phineas’s wife was pregnant –

and her response is even more poignant:

*when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured,
and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead,
she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her.
And about the time of her death the women attending her said to her,
‘Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son.’*

In other words, you may have lost your father-in-law and your husband,
but you have a son—a male who will take care of you!

But this woman understood that the birth of son meant nothing compared to the loss of the ark:
so she did not answer or pay attention.

*And she named the child Ichabod, saying
“The glory has departed from Israel!”*

I-chavod – “no glory”

The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.

And she died.

Psalm 78 reflects on the end of the period of the Judges:

*For they provoked him to anger with their high places;
they moved him to jealousy with their idols.*

When God heard, he was full of wrath, and he utterly rejected Israel.

*He forsook his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt among mankind,
and delivered his power to captivity, his glory to the hand of the foe.
He gave his people over to the sword and vented his wrath on his heritage.
Fire devoured their young men, and their young women had no marriage song.
Their priests fell by the sword, and their widows made no lamentation. (78:58-64)*

Psalm 78 sees 1 Samuel 4 as the final turning point—
the decisive moment in Israel’s history
leading up to the establishment of the house of David.

Because it is when God forsook Shiloh,
when he delivered his glory into the hand of his foes,
and when the priests fell by the sword,
*then the Lord awoke as from sleep,
like a strong man shouting because of wine.
And he put his adversaries to rout; he put them to everlasting shame.*
And then Psalm 78 speaks of how God called David his servant,
and set him as shepherd over Israel.

This is a terrible place to stop –
so I need to point you forward to chapter 7, verse 12:

*Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer;
for he said, ‘Till now the LORD has helped us.’ (7:12)*

This is the establishment of Ebenezer—the stone of help.
Israel had encamped at Ebenezer in chapter 4!
But now Samuel establishes a new Ebenezer.

Are there *two* Ebenezers?

Yes.

The first Ebenezer was in the coastal plain near the foothills of Ephraim.
That was the place where Israel was defeated,
where the ark was captured,
and where the two sons of Eli were killed.

But now Samuel sets up a stone in Benjamin, near Mizpah,
and called its name “Ebenezer.”

The death of the priests and the capture of the ark
will turn out to be the means that God uses to overthrow the Philistines.
Samuel is teaching the people that God’s triumph comes through our weakness.
The LORD brought judgment upon his priests and upon his people at Ebenezer.
But his purpose is to bring Israel through suffering to glory.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone!

*2. Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I'm come;
and I hope, by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God:
he, to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.*

Ebenezer is the place where God himself is brought under the power of his foes.
Ebenezer is the place where “Ichabod” is pronounced—“no glory.”

The glory has departed.

Ebenezer is the place where darkness falls,
where the lights go out.

When news comes from Ebenezer
the blind priest falls over backward and dies;
the pregnant woman gives birth to a son, and then dies.

And yet when God himself is brought under the power of the devil,
when our Lord Jesus Christ descends into hell,
he casts Dagon on his face, binds the strong man,
and plunders his house,
rescuing his people from the bonds of sin and death.

Even as Samuel saw Ebenezer turns I-chabod to Glory,
so also the cross.

Do not doubt that *God's purpose in your Ebenezer* is to turn ichabod to glory!

⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.