

Broomfield



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Heavy People in a Light Church

Health Craze

Today we live in a health-conscious society. In fact we long so much to be fit and healthy that literally hundreds of fad diets have arisen over the past couple of years. Here is a list of just some of the more popular diets:

- Atkins Diet.
- South Beach Diet
- Dr. Phil's Diet
- Jenny Craig's Diet
- Weight Watcher's Diet
- The Low Fat Diet
- The High Protein Diet
- The Ultra Slim Fast Diet

All these diets appeal to us because they help us lose weight, become fit, and live longer.

Now as a preacher I look at all of these diets and am amazed to discover that the church has parroted our secular culture here. For every fad diet in the world, we easily could mention a fad in the church. For example, over the years think of the more popular church programs that have been devised:

- The Purpose Driven life
- The 50 Day Spiritual Adventure
- Experiencing God
- Marriage Encounter
- Evangelism Explosion
- Growing Kids God's Way
- Peace Makers
- Back to Genesis Seminars
- Promise Keepers

Now, it is not my intention to ridicule or down play any of these “movements”— although some could be. Rather I want to draw your attention to them because the mere fact that they exist implies something about the church. There is indeed a spiritual crisis in the church today.

While most can't put their finger on what has caused this spiritual crisis, nevertheless, I think we all could testify to the fact that when we look out over evangelicalism, something is not right! And that is why these programs have arisen. They attempt to fill an intangible void that persists in the body of Christ.

The very simple premise is that the problem with the church is that it is light. This is the reason these programs have arisen and will continue to arise. They are seeking to fill this intangible void.

In fact, that is the issue around which our passage revolves. This passage is somewhat ambiguous. However 1 Samuel 4:1-11 reveals this simple premise that the church is light.

The Concept

1 Samuel 4:1-11 outlines the history of our passage. The year is 1104 BC. Samson has just attacked the Philistines and has inflicted some embarrassing if not heavy losses upon them.

The Philistines, ever used to being in the position of the aggressor,¹ resented Samson's victories, and so they planned a campaign that would strike at the heart of Israel. They planned not only to attack God's people but they also planned to attack Shiloh, the center of their worship.

The Philistines traveled north twenty miles from Ekron to Aphek. Here they planned to turn east and march the twenty-five miles to Shiloh where they would destroy the city and its temple. However, Israel met them at Ebenezer where the battle of 1 Samuel 4:1-11 took place.

Now brothers and sisters, something shocking occurred at this battle. As this text took place during the era of the Judges the pattern laid down in the book of Judges was quite predictable, and thus this is what we are looking for in 1 Samuel 4. God's people sin by ignoring God and doing their own thing. In order to discipline His people, God allows an enemy nation to rise up and enslave them. In time, God's people repent of their wickedness, return to God, and cry for help. And God provides a deliverer who, quite frankly, progressively is more godless and wretched.

A Change of Epic Proportions

The clear message of the Judges is, "If God can deliver and protect His people with this character, how much more with the Son of God?"

And so at this time we are used to God's people being enslaved by foreigners and crying out for help. And God sends just one man — and not necessarily godly — to be the deliverer. This judge fighting valiantly and delivers God's people from the oppressor. However, what we are not used to, and in fact we should be dumbfounded to read, is God's people fighting with something far greater than a Judge — the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of hosts who sits above the cherubim.² And then God's people were defeated!

1 Samuel 4:10-11, "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.

¹ Compare 1 Samuel 4:9

² Compare 1 Samuel 4:4

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

In other words, 1 Samuel 4 represents a shift of epic proportions in the history of God's people.

Think of the battles associated with these Bible characters:³

- Moses
- Joshua
- Barak
- Jephthah
- Gideon
- Samson

In each of these an inferior Israel proved victorious by the grace of God. But now God's people — armed with the greatest vessel of deliverance heretofore known to Israel, the Ark — lose the battle with a great slaughter! They are unable to prevail against the enemy. They are shown to be weak, impotent, and scared.

In fact, we could say that they now have a LIGHT⁴ PRESENCE among the nations!

Though Gideon's army was whittled down to just 300 men, nevertheless they fought as though they were 300,000. Though Samson was a lone warrior, nevertheless in the hands of God he conquered, destroyed, and killed many Philistine armies. Truly heretofore it didn't matter how large was the army or how perilous the journey, when God rose up to deliver His people, Israel had a HEAVY PRESENCE among the nations. Israel was not to be trifled with.

And yet in our passage this morning we see that those days are gone! Now they have a light presence.

Why

1 Samuel 2:29-30, “Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation; and honourest thy sons above me, to make yourselves fat with the chiefest of all the offerings of Israel my people? Wherefore the LORD God of Israel saith, I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the LORD saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed.”

This is God's statement to Eli and thus to all who live for themselves. Israel will be lightly esteemed by the Lord — even though they are armed with “the Ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts who sits above the cherubim” — because they have honored themselves above God.

This is why God's people are light. Their wants and desires have been placed in front of God's! They are heavy with themselves and their own sin!

And thus what we have in 1 Samuel 4:12-22 is God's answer for a people who honor themselves, and so

³ Compare Hebrews 11:32

⁴ Here we are using the term to mean weightless, insubstantial, frothy, wispy, feathery, flimsy in contrast to weighty or substantial.

as a group are lightly esteemed. They are heavy people in a light church!

This is a picture of the church today!

In fact look around and you will see that our churches are no different than the body of Christ in Samuel's day. They are light, and yet they are filled with heavy people!

Light Churches

There was a time when any decision, act or declaration by the church was front page news. There was a time when the church — just by being faithful — had an impact on their world. In fact when the Apostle Paul visited Thessalonica he was accused of upsetting the world.

Acts 17:6, “And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also.”

I recall the story of Queen Mary who when she was told that John Knox was praying said, “Tell me that our kingdom is under attack; just don't tell me that John Knox is on his knees.”

But those days are gone. In the thirteenth Thomas Aquinas visited Pope Innocent II. During the visit, the Pope showed Thomas the wealth of Rome. He showed him the abundance of funds in the church treasury, the works of art, and the extravagant decorations and ornaments in the chapel.

After the grand tour, the Pope turned to Thomas and said with a smile, “Well, the church can no longer say, `Silver and gold have I none.’“

“True,” came Thomas' reply, “but neither can she say, `Rise up and walk.’“

Indeed the church today is the object of jokes. The only time our society sees it is when it is fraught with scandal — which of late has been quite frequent. We have little impact on the world and the community in which we live.⁵ The church is light-weight, anemic, weak, and ingrown.

And yet you'd never know it by looking at her people.

Heavy People

In contrast, our people are heavy. Do you know how much money is spent by church goers on themselves each year? It's astronomical!

We are in love with entertainment and pleasure. Though we have more helps at our disposal, we struggle today more than ever with issues like these:

- Self-esteem
- Depression
- Worry

⁵ I'm not suggesting that we ought to have a political agenda or even a social agenda for our world as Christians. The greatest impact we could have on our society is the proclamation of the gospel and a life that reflects what we teach!

- Jealousy
- Lack of fulfillment

..Just use the money spent on therapy for one month, and you could build a church building, debt free every week for a year.

We do not fear God; instead today God's people fear the future, the past, their bosses, loneliness, singleness, and public opinion. John Angell James, commenting on Revelation 3:1, put it this way:

“One most impressive lesson which is taught here, is that churches may have a reputation for being in a flourishing condition- and yet be all the while in a state of progressive decay! How many churches are flattering themselves that they are in a flourishing condition! The place of worship may be commodious, elegant, and free from debt. The minister may be popular, and approved by his flock. The congregation may be large, respectable, and influential. The finances may be good, and even prosperous. In short, there may be every mark of external prosperity...

“But examine its internal state! Inquire into its condition as viewed by God! Inspect the private conduct of its members- and what a different aspect of things is seen then!”⁶

Truly, we are a heavy people in a light church. And that brings us to our passage and God's response.

The Comparison

1 Samuel 4:18-19, “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. And his daughter in law, Phinehas’ wife, was with child, near to be delivered: and when she heard the tidings that the ark of God was taken, and that her father in law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and travailed; for her pains came upon her.”

It should be obvious as we look at this text that the focus here is on two people who had weight⁷ problems. Eli's was self-induced. However, Phinehas's wife was the result of her association with Phinehas- she was carrying his child.

And these represent two kinds of weight problems that exist in the church today. Most are self-induced. We love ourselves. And so we spend much of our time, effort, and money in the effort to better our condition. With the result that indeed, we resemble Eli “who was heavy.”⁸ (1 Sam. 4:18).

But then there are our associations that — on account of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life — we have allowed to influence us.

Phinehas' wife was not a victim. She was a willing participant in her husband's and Israel's sin. As she died she had an incredible sorrow over the death of her father-in-law, her husband, and the lost Ark.⁹

⁶ Quoted in *Earnestness in Religion*, John Angell James http://www.gracegems.org/25/earnestness_in_religion.htm

⁷ Now, the weight problem could also be termed a glory problem. Eli and Phinehas’ wife both sought self glorification, rather than glorifying God.

⁸ Compare 1 Samuel 4:18

⁹ Compare 1 Samuel 4:21

However, she never showed any remorse or hatred of her husband's infidelity.¹⁰ Truly she loved her husband, her life, and thus —we conclude —his sin!

And we have become her sons and daughters on account of our willful associations with fat men and women.

Now don't misunderstand this. It is not that we should not seek to minister to the weak and struggling Christian or non-Christians. It is that we must not be on the receiving end when it comes to influence. We must be the minister — the giver, the pace-setter. We must not be the ministry — the receiver, the one who conforms. For when we become the ministry, we too become heavy with ourselves.

And so via "The Comparison" that is evident in this passage, we see the two types of heavy people that comprise the church today. That finally brings us in this introduction to the core issue.

Core Issue — The Ark

What is it that makes us heavy? And what is it that makes our churches light?

1 Samuel 4:13, "And when he [the messenger] 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."

1 Samuel 17b-18, "And the ark of God is taken. 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 4:19b, "And when she heard the tidings that the ark of God was taken, and that her father in law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and travailed; for her pains came upon her."

1 Samuel 4:21, "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."

1 Samuel 4:22, "And she said, The glory is departed from Israel: for the ark of God is taken."

It is quite clear that the focus of this section is the "Ark" — it is mentioned no less than 6 times in 11 verses!

Accordingly we conclude that in spite of their sin and rebellion, Eli and Phinehas' wife's well-being — as well as the nation's — was inseparably connected to the Ark! In other words, what they did with the Ark determined their weight, their health, and their future.

And what did they do with the ark?

First, they despised it.

1 Samuel 2:17, "Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD: for men

¹⁰ Compare 1 Samuel 2:22

abhorred¹¹ the offering of the LORD.”

The word rendered abhorred or despise is the Hebrew word used in reference to the covenantal love of God. As such, it references the activity of treating something lightly and so with disdain. Accordingly, when it came to the offering of the Lord — which would have involved the Ark of the Covenant — the people of God treated it with contempt. They looked upon it with levity and disdain. They despised it.

Secondly, they sought to use it.

1 Samuel 4:3, “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.”

As we have seen, this is an amazing statement. When the going got tough, God's people became religious. Now, they had a place for the Ark of the Covenant in their lives.

Now don't miss it. It wasn't so that they could draw near to God, or better serve the Lord, or worship Him. Rather it was so that they might have their own way, and so be delivered from difficulty. And so on account of their rebellion and attempted manipulation of the Ark, Israel suffered greatly here.

And this raises the question, “Why was their well-being tied so closely to the Ark?”

The Ark represented at least four things to God's people.

1. It was the place where God manifested Himself to His people.

Judges 20:27-28, “And the children of Israel enquired of the LORD, (for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, And Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it in those days,) saying, Shall I yet again go out to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease? And the LORD said, Go up; for to morrow I will deliver them into thine hand.”

1 Chronicles 17:1, “Now it came to pass, as David sat in his house, that David said to Nathan the prophet, Lo, I dwell in an house of cedars, but the ark of the covenant of the LORD remaineth under curtains.”

1 Chronicles 17:3-4, “And it came to pass the same night, that the word of God came to Nathan, saying, Go and tell David my servant, Thus saith the LORD, Thou shalt not build me an house to dwell in.”

From these passages and more we conclude that the Ark was a vessel by which and through which God ordinarily manifested Himself to His people! It was a portable Burning Bush! It ordinarily housed the Shekinah glory of God!

2. It therefore was God's throne on earth.

¹¹ אָטַס na'ats

Jeremiah 3:16-17, “And it shall come to pass, when ye be multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, saith the LORD, they shall say no more, The ark of the covenant of the LORD: neither shall it come to mind: neither shall they remember it; neither shall they visit it; neither shall that be done any more. At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the LORD [by comparison the Ark here is being identified as the “throne of the Lord.”].

While we are far removed from the days of kings and royal courts, we must see that this is a significant description when it came to the Ark. The place of authority, judgment, power, glory, and honor was the throne of a king. Thus the Ark was nothing less than this at this time in redemptive history.

3. It also was where God's people fellowshiped with God.

Exodus 25:22, “And there [speaking of the Ark] I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel.

When Joshua sought an answer from the Lord on why they failed in their conquest of Ai we read this:

Joshua 7:6, “And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the LORD until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads. And Joshua said, Alas, O Lord GOD ”

Do you understand therefore what the Ark of the Covenant was?

It was nothing less than the place where God condescended to our level in order to fellowship with His people.

4. And yet, this is not strong enough. Notice finally that it also was nothing less than Christ Himself. When Paul spoke of Christ he said this:

Romans 3:25, “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.”

The most important part of the Ark of the Covenant was the Mercy Seat. At the Mercy Seat the blood of atonement was sprinkled. God met with His people in fellowship. The word used for *Mercy Seat* is also the same word used in Romans 3:25 for propitiation.

In other words, Christ is the Mercy Seat. Christ is where God meets to fellowship with His people! Christ is what the Ark was all about!

From all of this it should be obvious that the health and welfare of the people of God was ever and always linked to the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord. Because the Ark was nothing less than Christ to the people of God!

And thus the CORE ISSUE when it comes to being heavy or light as a people of God or a church was and continues to be what we do NOT with a religious symbol BUT with Christ — and more importantly how we view Him!

Do you put up with Christ and so despise Him?

I'm not suggesting that you feel disdain for Him or openly reject Him. But just like the people of God in Eli's day, do you view Christ as a burden? Or perhaps an inconvenience to your plans, will, future? Or Christ is perhaps a necessary obligation? Has His will and purpose for your life not met with your approval?

Or maybe your relationship with Christ is that of the consumer. When you are lonely, weak, hurting, or in need that is when you call upon Him. It's not that you love Him much or really care about Him. But if He is the means to greater happiness, there's room for Him in your Inn.

Whether this describes you or not, this always is the description of the people of God when they are heavy and the church is light.¹²

May the Lord grant us the grace to accept Him on His terms. Worship Him as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Let us be light — as in weight — in our eyes and the world's eyes. And let our church be heavy in salt and light.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on November 4, 2005. Greg is the Preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.

¹² Next week we are going to pick this up and examine this passage in greater detail.