

Church of God Sunday School

THE ARK IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY

1 Samuel 4:1 – 7:13

Samuel was growing older. His mother, in obedience to a vow, had given him to the Lord at a very young age. Samuel had grown up in the temple, helping Eli the priest. God continued speaking to Samuel, just as He had when Samuel was a young boy.

Israel had gone out to fight the Philistines, and they lost the battle. About four thousand men died that day. The elders of Israel decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant with them to the battle, hoping that "it may save us out of the hand of our enemies." (Would the Ark save them when they had rejected God to worship idols?)

When the Israelites saw the Ark being brought into the camp, they were encouraged. "All Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again." The Philistines heard this shouting and said, "What meaneth the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews?" Then they realized that the Ark had come into the Israelites' camp.

This brought great fear upon the Philistines, and they said, "God is come into the camp." They knew of the great things God had done for Israel.

But they encouraged each other, saying, "Be strong, and quit [or show] yourselves like men . . . and fight."

The Philistines fought so well that every one of the Israelites fled to his tent. "There was a very great slaughter," and 30,000 men of Israel were killed. If that wasn't bad enough, the "ark of God was taken" by the enemy. The two wicked sons of Eli—Hophni (*HOF-nigh*) and Phinehas (*FIN-ee-uhs*)—priests who took care of the Ark, were killed as well.

A messenger ran back to Shiloh to tell the terrible news of what had happened to the Ark of the Covenant. Eli was a very old man at this time (98 years old) and blind. He was worried about the Ark

and sat "upon a seat by the wayside watching." When the people heard the bad news, "all the city cried out."

Eli heard all the noise and asked what it meant. When the messenger told Eli what had happened—the loss of so many Israelites in battle, the death of his two sons, and the loss of the Ark—the news was too much for Eli. He fell back off of his seat. His neck broke and he died. "And he had judged Israel forty years."

The wife of Phinehas was expecting a baby. When she heard the terrible news, she gave birth to a son and died. As she was dying, "she named the child Ichabod." She said, "The glory is departed from Israel: for the ark of God is taken."



The Philistines took the Ark to their city of Ashdod. There they placed the Ark in the house of their god, Dagon (*DAY-gon*). (The false god Dagon was part fish and part human.) The next morning, they found Dagon had "fallen upon his face to the earth before the ark of the LORD." They picked Dagon up and set him in his place.

But the next morning, they found Dagon lying on his face before the Ark again. This time the head and palms of his hands "were cut off" and lay "upon the threshold." (Because Dagon had lain on the threshold, from that time on the people would not step on the threshold, considering it sacred.)

Nevertheless, the Ark remained in Ashdod. So, God sent a painful disease on the people of the city. The men of Ashdod decided to move the Ark to the city of Gath. But things were no better for the people of Gath. When the Ark was carried there, they, too, were struck with the same painful disease. Next, the Ark was sent to the city of Ekron (*EK-ron*), and the people of that city "cried out, saying, They have brought about the ark of the God of Israel to us, to slay us and

our people." Here, too, "was a deadly destruction throughout all the city."

The lords of the Philistines gathered together to decide what to do with the Ark. The Ark had been "in the country of the Philistines seven months." It was decided that a brand-new cart with two "milch kine" (milk cows with young calves) would be used to transport the Ark. A gift of "jewels of gold" was placed in a chest on the cart too.

The Philistines sent the cart with the Ark on its way. The cart did not have a human driver. Where would the milk cows take it? It would be natural for them to head back home to their calves. The Philistines decided if the milk cows took the cart back to the land of Israel, they would know this had all been the hand of God. But if not, they would believe that it had all just happened by chance.

The milk cows, crying for their calves, headed straight toward the border of Bethshemesh (*baeth-SHEH-mesh*)—the land of Israel! They "turned not aside to the right hand or to the left," and the lords of the Philistines followed them to the border.

The people of Bethshemesh were "reaping their wheat harvest in the valley." When they saw the Ark coming toward them, they "rejoiced to see it." Using the cart and the milk cows, they offered "a burnt offering unto the LORD." Then the Levites took the Ark and the "jewels of gold."

This should have been a wonderful day for the people of Bethshemesh, but against the laws of God (Numbers 4:20) they "looked into the ark of the LORD." A large number of people died because of this act of disobedience! Then the men said, "Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? and to whom shall he go up from us?"

When the people of Kirjathjearim (*kihr-ee-ath-JEE-uh-rim*) were told of the return of the Ark, they went and brought it to the "house of Abinadab (*uh-BIN-uh-dab*)." The Ark was kept there for twenty years. "And all the house of Israel lamented [mourned] after the LORD."

The Prophet Samuel told the people of Israel that if they would put away their "strange gods . . . and prepare your hearts unto the LORD, and serve him only," God would deliver them "out of the hand of the Philistines." The people did as Samuel said.

Then the people and Samuel came together in Mizpeh (*MIZ-puh*). They fasted and admitted their sin against the Lord. When the Philistines heard of the gathering, they came nearby to fight. The Israelites were afraid! Samuel offered a sacrifice and cried to the Lord for Israel. "And the Lord heard him."

The Lord sent "a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited [confused] them; and they were smitten before Israel." God gave Israel a great victory! How much better it was when Israel let God fight their battles for them!

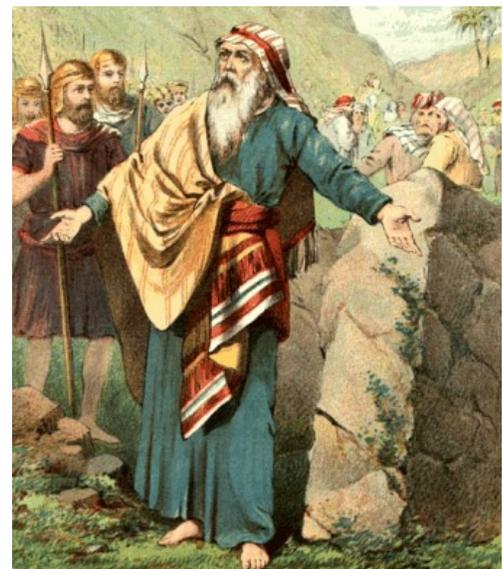
Samuel then set up a stone as a memorial. And he "called the name of it Ebenezer [*eb-uh-NEE-zuhr*], saying, Hitherto hath the LORD helped us." From that time on, the Philistines "came no more into the coast of Israel: and the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel."

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**MEMORY VERSE:**

*"Return unto the Lord with all your hearts . . . and serve him only: and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines."*  
 —1 Samuel 7:3  
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Bethshemesh
 Kirjathjearim
 Mizpeh
 Ashdod
 Shiloh
 Ekron
 Israel
 Gath

Circle the Names of Philistine Cities



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