

1 Samuel 4–6: “The Glory Has Departed” – God’s Sovereign Holiness vs. Religious Presumption

Israel’s misuse of the Ark exposes our own tendencies to treat God (or “church stuff”) as a controllable talisman. The Ark is not a lucky charm or idol; God’s presence cannot be manipulated, and His holiness demands reverence. Yet even in judgment, He sovereignly defends His name and invites return. How do we recover awe-filled obedience in a casual age?

Discussion Topic 1: Presumptuous Faith – Treating God Like a Good-Luck Charm (1 Samuel 4:1-11)

Scripture Focus: “Let us bring the ark... that it may come among us and save us” (v. 3). They shout as if the Ark guarantees victory (v. 5), yet 30,000 die and the Ark is captured (vv. 10-11). Because they valued the ark more than the One who sat on it (Rom 1:22-25) eventually God would remove the ark (Jer 3:16) and people would come to worship in spirit and truth (Jn 4:23-24).

Key Insights:

Israel ignores prior sin (Eli’s corrupt sons, 2:12-17, 22-25; cf. 3:11-14 judgment prophecy) and skips seeking God (contrast Joshua 9 or Judges cycle). They treat the Ark (symbol of covenant, Ex 25:10-22; Num 10:35-36) like pagan idols (Josh 6, but that was commanded obedience). Philistines ironically fear the “gods who struck the Egyptians” (v. 8; cf. Ex 12:12).

Cross-references: Josh 7:7-13 (defeat from hidden sin, not ritual); Num 14:44 (presumptuous advance without Ark/God); Deut 28:15-68 (curses for covenant breach); Mt 7:21-23 (religious activity without relationship); 2 Tim 3:5 (“having the appearance of godliness but denying its power”).

Discussion Questions:

1. Where in our lives/churches do we “bring the Ark” (programs, traditions, past revivals, Christian branding) expecting automatic blessing without repentance or seeking God’s face first?
2. Compare Israel’s shout (v. 5) to modern “name it and claim it” thinking or “God owes me” attitudes. What does this reveal about our view of the covenant?
3. How does this story expose the difference between *possessing* symbols of God and *being possessed by God*? (Tie to 1 Cor 10:1-5 – ancestors had the cloud/sea but were overthrown.)

Discussion Topic 2: The Glory Has Departed – When God’s Presence Leaves (1 Samuel 4:12-22)

Scripture Focus: “The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured” (vv. 21-22; Ichabod named by Phinehas’ wife). Eli dies at the news (v. 18).

Key Insights:

The Ark = visible sign of Yahweh’s enthroned presence (Ex 25:22; “between the two cherubims” 4:4). Its loss signals covenant breach, not God’s defeat.

Cross-references: Ezek 9:3; 10:18-19; 11:22-23 (glory departs polluted temple); Ps 78:60-61 (God abandons Shiloh); Rev 2:4-5 (remove lampstand from loveless church); Rom 1:24-28 (God “gives over” to consequences). Contrast later return under David (2 Sam 6) and ultimate glory in Christ (Jn 1:14; Mt 28:20).

Discussion Questions:

1. “Ichabod” moments happen corporately (churches that lose fire) and personally (dryness from unconfessed sin). Share (without gossip) a time you sensed God’s glory “depart” in a ministry or relationship— what caused it?
2. Eli “trembled for the ark” (v. 13) yet never confronted his sons’ sin earlier. How do we grieve symptoms (lost blessing) while tolerating root causes (unholiness)?
3. For mature believers: How does this warn against “form of godliness” in our generation (cf. 2 Tim 3:5)? What would revival look like—recovering the glory?

Discussion Topic 3: God's Supremacy Over Idols and Nations (1 Samuel 5:1-12)

Scripture Focus: Ark in Dagon's temple → Dagon falls twice and is dismembered (vv. 3-4); plagues/tumors on Philistines in Ashdod, Gath, Ekron (vv. 6-12).

Key Insights:

God needs no army—He mocks idols from within their own house (cf. Philistines' fear in 4:7-8). The "hand of the Lord" brings judgment exactly as in Egypt.

Cross-references: Ex 12:12 & 18:11 (judgment on Egyptian gods c.f. Rev 16); Isa 46:1-2 (Bel and Nebo bow); Ps 115:1-8 ("Their idols are silver and gold... those who make them become like them"); 1 Cor 8:4-6 & 10:19-21 (idols are nothing, but demons are real);

Discussion Questions:

1. Modern "Dagons" (career, politics, entertainment, self-image) look powerful until God shows up. Which cultural idols has God already humbled in your lifetime?
2. The Philistines recognize Yahweh's power yet never repent—they just want relief (vv. 7, 11). Contrast with Nineveh (Jonah 3:6-10). Why is partial acknowledgment of God dangerous?
3. How does this encourage us when culture seems to "capture" God's reputation (e.g., scandals, secularism)?

Discussion Topic 4: Holy Reverence or Judgment – The Cost of Casual Faith (1 Samuel 6:1-21)

Scripture Focus: Philistines return Ark with guilt offering (golden tumors/mice, vv. 3-5, 17-18); cows go straight to Beth-shemesh (supernatural guidance, vv. 7-12); 70 men struck for looking into the Ark (v. 19).

Key Insights:

Even pagans design a test that proves God's control (vv. 9, 12). Israel's joy turns to terror because they violate holiness laws (Levites only; Ark covered, Num 4:5-6, 15, 20).

Cross-references: 2 Sam 6:6-11 (Uzzah dies touching Ark); Lev 10:1-3 (Nadab/Abihu – "I will be sanctified in those who come near Me"); Heb 12:28-29 ("worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire"); 1 Cor 11:27-32 (unworthy Lord's Supper brings judgment); 1 Pet 1:15-16 ("Be holy, for I am holy").

Discussion Questions:

1. Beth-shemesh rejoiced at first sight of the Ark—yet died for irreverence. How do we slide into casual familiarity with holy things (communion, worship, Scripture, spiritual gifts)?
2. The Philistines' "test" (v. 9) shows God's sovereignty even over animals and enemies. Where in your life do you need to trust God's straight-path guidance instead of micromanaging?
3. Compare the Ark's return here with its later joyful (but still reverent) procession under David. What changed? (Hint: repentance in 7:3-6.)