

THE ARK TAKEN AND RETURNED

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To Study: 1 Samuel chapters 4, 5, and 6.

To Read in class: 1 Samuel 5:1-8; 6:1-9.

Memory Texts:

Younger: Revelation 15:4 “Who shall not fear Thee, O Lord, and glorify Thy name?
For Thou only art holy.”

Older: 1 Peter 4:17 “For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God:
and if it first begin at us,
what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?”

OBJECTIVES: To teach that:

1. Human ideas are often contrary to God’s specific instructions.
2. No one obtains the desired blessing of God by using amulets or having religious symbols
3. Prophecies are fulfilled according to the explicit word of God.
4. God used a series of physical judgments to show His rejection of idolatry.
5. In the return of the ark, God used the animal kingdom to give evidence of His power.

VISUAL AIDS: A field between Ebenezer and Aphek and figures of a battle and the ark of the covenant of the Lord coming into the battlefield, carried by some priests.

DEVELOPMENT:

Note: The first scene describes events recorded in 1 Samuel 4.

- Without consulting Samuel the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines and four thousand men died. (1 Samuel 4:2.)
- Before the next battle, the leaders of the people analyzed the situation and decided to bring the Ark from Shiloh (1 Samuel 4:3.) They did not consult Samuel about this.
- In their condition of being far from God, they believe that the Lord’s help is related to the symbol of His presence and will assure their victory.
- In accordance with the pagan ideas of those days, people frequently took their idols to battle.

Lsn. The Israelites had to learn that power comes from **A PERSON**, and not from an **OBJECT**.

- The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were leaders of the group that brings the ark. It is an act of rebellion against God, for they did not take into account that this is a sacred piece of furniture.
- They acted contrary to the will of God because they based their idea on human thinking.

Cns. Human ideas and practices often are contrary to the will of God. Remember that having an object that represents divine power is no guarantee of success.

Apl. Crucifixes, amulets, and special stones that people hang on their bodies are not the means of ensuring God’s blessing.

Lsn. It is obedience to the Word of God that allows Him to work on our behalf. (1 Samuel 2:30.)

Cns. The promise of Deuteronomy 20:1-4 is valid only when wars are carried out by the will of God.

- When the ark reached the camp of Israel, the people shouted for joy because they thought they now had a guarantee of victory.
 - The Philistines heard the shouting and interpreted the event as “**God is come into their camp.**” (1 Samuel 4:7.)
 - The Philistines remember the dramatic exodus of the Israelites from Egypt many years before and are afraid that what had happened to Pharaoh could happen to them.
 - They made the mistake of thinking that Israel has several gods and not One only (1 Samuel 4:8).
- Cns.** It is interesting that the Philistines knew what had happened in Egypt years earlier and of the judgment that fell on Pharaoh (1 Samuel 6:6).
- The Philistines encourage themselves to be very courageous.

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- The Israelites act on a mistaken idea and as a result, suffer a disastrous defeat.

1. Thirty thousand men were killed.
2. The two sons of Eli died.
3. The ark fell into enemy hands.

Cns. God permits failure in our lives to show us that we are acting contrary to His will.

SCENE No. 2. VISUAL AIDS: In Shiloh, the city where the tabernacle was located, and in it the ark. Figures of a group of people listening to a messenger. Eli, old and very stout, sits at the entrance.

DEVELOPMENT:

- A messenger with torn clothing and earth on his head as a sign of mourning arrives from the battlefield and tells the people of Shiloh that the battle has been lost and the ark captured.
- **"When the man came into the city and told it, all the city cried out."** And with good reason. (1 Samuel 4:13.)
- Eli is 98 years of age and is blind. He hears a great noise and asks the reason.
- The messenger recounts everything to Eli, including the news of the death of his two sons. (1 Samuel 4:17.)
- The prophesy about the death of Hophni and Phinehas was fulfilled (1 Samuel 2:34 and 3:11-14).
- No doubt the other prophesy of 1 Samuel. 3:11 was also fulfilled, **"both the ears of every one that hears it will tingle."**

Apl. Emphasize that even as these prophesies were fulfilled in the death of the two sons of Eli, likewise God will carry out what He has predicted about the future of the Church, the world, and the unsaved.

Cmt. People of the world in general are very sure of themselves and do not take God into account. They ignore many of His warnings about the future. This explains why so much importance must be given to the prophetic part of the Bible.

- The news about the ark falling into enemy hands affected Eli the most. (1 Samuel 4:18.)
- People fled, knowing that a defeat in war meant looting by the enemy.
- The wife of Phinehas was about to give birth and "her pains came upon her" when she heard about the death of her husband and her father-in-law and the loss of the ark.
- When the child was born, she called him **ICHABOD**, meaning "there is no glory".

Cmt. The Israelite who understood that the ark was a symbol of the glory and holiness of God, knew they had suffered a very great loss, as well as a loss of honour for the people of God.

Cmt. Each time that someone spoke Ichabod's name, it was a reminder of the tragedy that befell the Israelites.

Cns. The tragedy was a shameful loss of honour for the people of God. Besides that it was the physical loss of the ark into the hands of the Philistines.

SCENE No. 3. VISUAL AIDS: Temple of Dagon with a figure of the idol and the ark.

DEVELOPMENT:

- The Philistines that captured the ark placed it in the temple of their god, Dagon. This was in the city of Ashdod.
- The temple of Dagon was a sacred place to the Philistines. To God, it was a blasphemous act.
- God does not tolerate that which symbolizes His presence to share its place with anyone, much less with an idol.

Apl. God defends His honour when it is not respected.

- In the morning the priests of Dagon observed with surprise and displeasure that their “god” had fallen before the ark of the covenant.
- The next morning, Dagon was again on the ground, this time with his head and his hands cut off.
- If they thought the first fall was an accident, the second time they had to realize that the fall was due to the presence of the ark.
- The judgment of the severed head and hands of Dagon demonstrated that he had no power before the ark of the Lord, since he lost precisely those parts of his “body” that are related to thinking and acting.
- The judgment of God ought to have shown the Philistines the powerlessness of their idol.

Apl. Satan’s kingdom will fall before the kingdom of Christ; error will not stand before the truth.

Cmt. With all the things that were happening, the Philistines became well instructed concerning the living God.

Sug. It should be made clear that we cannot attribute every disaster that happens in life to the judgment of God. However, there are certain experiences that teach the fear of God and they leave a permanent impression on the mind.

- At the same time of the judgment on Dagon, God sent a plague of rats and tumours.

Cmt. The tumours were a kind of boil. They sometimes became infected and often bled. In some cases they were malignant, even bringing death.

SCENE No. 4. VISUAL AIDS: A road among hills and figures of the five lords of the Philistines, observing while the ark is carried on a cart pulled by two cows toward the land of the Israelites. On a patch a picture of the two calves which were enclosed at home.

DEVELOPMENT:

- While the ark was in Ashdod, the Philistines felt the Lord’s hand increasingly heavily on them.
 - They wanted no more problems and instead of recognizing the Lord as the true God, they decided that **“the ark of the God of Israel shall not abide with us.”**
 - They decided to send it to Gath (1 Samuel 5:7-8).
 - In Gath, people of all ages suffered the judgment of God. (1 Samuel 5:9.)
 - Next the ark was sent from Gath to Ekron, but this caused great distress to the people of Ekron.
- Cmt.** It seemed that the Philistines had not learned the lesson that God wished to teach them through suffering - that the God of the Israelites is the One True God.
- For seven months the ark stayed in the land of the Philistines. These were months of affliction under the firm hand of God (1 Samuel 6:1).

Apl. The sinner that refuses to leave his sin also prolongs his own suffering.

- The Philistines decided to return the ark. They thought that the Lord would be appeased and that they would expiate (compensate or make amends) their sin. For this reason they sent golden jewels, plus idolatrous replicas of the plague they had suffered.

Cns. They wished to buy peace with God - an attempt that will always fail.

- The priests and diviners of the Philistines knew only pagan superstitions and this influenced their recommendations.

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- The Philistines were superstitious and interpreted the route taken by the animals as showing whether it really was the God of Israel that sent the plague.
- They chose two cows that were still feeding their young and harnessed them to the cart on which they put the ark. They enclosed their calves in the stable so that they could not get to them. (1 Samuel 6:12.)
- The frequent lowing of the cows showed the desire of these animals to be with their young but since they continued on their way, it provides proof of the supernatural influence of God working present in the matter.
- According to the route chosen by the cows, the Philistines think they can determine the reason for what had happened. (1 Samuel 6:5)

Cns. The law of God required that the ark be carried on the shoulders of the Kohathites. (Numbers 4:4, 15). The Philistines were not responsible to practice this law.

- The Philistines are interested in getting rid of the ark due to the problems it caused them.
- The two animals took the right road without guidance and remained on it without turning until they reached the nearest city, Beth-shemesh, which belonged to the Levites.
- The workers in the field rejoiced to see the ark return and used the wood of the cart to sacrifice the two animals in thanksgiving to God.

Cmt. It is important that the teacher mention that in the world mistaken ideas are used to interpret certain phenomena or events. Interpretations range from the use of tarot cards to mentioning sinister powers at work and the need to appease them.

Lsn. The believer uses the Bible to understand life and the things that occur.

Cns. God made His power evident through the cattle even though Philistines did not have the spoken testimony of a prophet of Jehovah.

- After seeing what happened, the five lords of the Philistines returned to Ekron (I Samuel 6:16), convinced, but not repentant.

Lsn. When we do not adjust our lives to the will of God, many suffer. In this case, the Israelites were made ashamed and the Philistines suffered physical sicknesses.

- In spite of everything suffered by the people, there was yet another judgment to bear, when 50,070 inhabitants of Beth-shemesh died when they dared to look inside the ark. This was a larger number than had died on the battlefield (1 Samuel 6:19).
- The tabernacle with the ark was later found in Gibeon (See 1 Chronicles 16:39; 21:29; 2 Chronicles 1:3,13).

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Additional note. Archeologists have discovered that Shiloh was destroyed around 1050 B.C., probably by the Philistines and likely at the time of this event. The tabernacle was removed also (Jeremiah 7:12-15, 26:6-7).