

THE MORNING OF THE MONARCHY STUDIES IN FIRST SAMUEL LESSON 3

"THE LOST RAIDERS OF THE ARK" 1 Samuel 4-6

Few movies have captured the imagination of the American people like the colorful adventure, "Raiders of the Lost Ark." Based upon legend, superstition, imagination and some Bible verses, the movie was about an attempt to find the so-called "lost ark" in Egypt during the Second World War. The ark, however, is not lost. God knows exactly where it is and since He owns it, that is all that really matters. But the legendary travels of the ark and some of the story of the movie were taken from 1 Samuel 4-6.

I. THE DEFEAT OF ISRAEL 4:1-10

In 1 Samuel 4 we have the fascinating and somewhat humorous story about the journeys of the ark. Samuel began to speak for God as the acting high priest, a prophet and the last of the judges. Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle and camped beside Ebenezer while the Philistines camped in Aphek. The name Ebenezer (as we learn in chapter 7) had not been given yet, but the author(s) writing many years later tells us the name of the place where Samuel had placed a memorial. The word means "hitherto has the Lord helped." It was meant to enable the Israelite to look at it and say, "This marker tells me that God has helped us in the past," with the hope that in the future God would help them yet.

A. The Philistine Army

When God divided the land through Joshua, each of the tribes was given a portion to conquer, but few, if any of them, conquered and occupied all their land. In fact, for the most part Israel only captured the hill country. The very fertile plain along the coast all the way from Gaza up to Mt. Carmel, known as the Plain of Sharon and the Plain of the Philistines, was never really occupied by ancient Israel. They were always in conflict with the people there.

B. The Battle

Probably emboldened by God giving them a new spokesman in Samuel, Israel went on the offensive and went out to meet the Philistines in battle. When the battle spread, Israel was defeated, losing 4,000 men on the battlefield. Evidently, when they won the battle of Aphek, the Philistines came over and destroyed Shiloh and from that day on Shiloh was never heard of again, except as a reminder of judgment. Hundreds of years later, Jeremiah wrote, "But go now to My place which was in Shiloh, where I made My name dwell at the first, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel" (7:12). He was referring to this incident. Again, in Jeremiah 26:6 he referred to Shiloh with a statement of judgment. "Then I will make this house like Shiloh, and this city I will make a curse to all the nations of the earth". Our Lord too was referring to Jeremiah and Shiloh when He said, "You are making it a robbers' den" (Mt. 21:13; cf. Jer. 7:9-14).

II. THE CAPTURE OF THE ARK 4:11-22

After the battle, the elders of Israel well understood that the defeat was not so much a sign of Philistine military supremacy as it was a sign of God's displeasure. But they decided that the reason was because they needed the ark. Why did they think the ark could give them victory?

A. The Nature of the Ark

The ark was simply a large box. In fact, the word was translated "coffin" in Genesis 50:26. It was approximately 3¾ feet long, about 2 feet wide and 2 feet high. It was made of acacia wood, overlaid inside and out with pure gold. It had four rings, probably at each corner, in which two staves were permanently placed so it could be carried. On top of this box was placed a lid made of pure gold called the "mercy seat," and covering the mercy seat were, gold-engraved images of imaginary creatures called cherubim.

B. The Contents of the Ark

They superstitiously took the ark from the tabernacle at Shiloh. Notice their use of the full name for the ark. The rest of the time it was simply called "the ark." But its name was the "Ark of the Covenant." It reminded them that God had made a covenant with them, but it also reminded them of the contents of the ark.

1. The tables of the covenant

The solitary items placed in the ark at the time of the completion of the tabernacle were the two stone tablets cut out by Moses and written upon with the finger of God (Ex. 32:16). The unique purpose of the tabernacle, which set it off from all other such temples or shrines of all places and of all times, was the embodiment of these tablets. In the holy solitude of the Most Holy Place was not an idol, but the tangible symbols of the Word of God.

2. The golden jar of manna

Nothing else is said to have been put into the ark, and the tables were found there by themselves in the time of Solomon. However, Hebrews 9:4 says the ark also contained a golden jar holding manna and Aaron's rod that budded. The jar and the rod had been put into the ark before it was taken by the Philistines, but they were not sent back with the ark (1 Sam. 6:8-11). This is why only the tables were found inside the ark when it was brought into Solomon's temple and why the writer remarked upon it in 1 Kings 8:9.

3. Aaron's rod that budded

God's third and final confirmation of Moses and Aaron was by the miracle of causing Aaron's walking staff to sprout, bud, bloom and bear ripe almonds (Nu. 17:8). As a constant reminder of God's choice and provision of leadership, the rod was placed before the ark and later treasured in the ark itself (Nu. 17:10-11).

4. The significance of the contents

Each of the items preserved was an expression of God's benevolence to His chosen people and was meant to be a reminder of His law, His supply and His leadership. But each provision was despised by that first generation. They broke the covenant (Ex.32:), griped about the manna (Nu. 11:6, 31-33) and continuously rebelled against Moses' leadership, even refusing to enter the promised land (Nu. 14:1-10).

C. The Royal Function of the Ark

But was the Ark of the Covenant only a container of the tablets of the covenant? Was that its only function? Scripture clearly teach that it was not. Numbers 10:35-36 show that the ark was regarded as the symbol of God's Presence. In this light, the ark was clearly seen as the equivalent of a footstool. David said in 1 Chronicles 28:2, "I had intended to build a permanent home for the ark of the covenant of the LORD and for the footstool of our God." A phrase like "worship at His footstool" (Ps. 99:5; 132:7-8) obviously had the Holy of Holies in mind. Jeremiah said, "He has not remembered His footstool in the day of His anger" (Lam. 2:1). If the ark was the footstool, where was the throne? It was imaginatively thought of as resting on or between, and carried by, the cherubim in the Most Holy Place. The divine Voice came from the space over the ark and between the wings of the cherubim (Ex. 25:21-22). Psalm 55:19 and Psalm 113:5-6 speak of God as being "enthroned." But more specifically note the frequent references that specifically state that He was "enthroned above the cherubim": 2 Samuel 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chronicles 13:6.

This concept explains why the Israelites held the ark in such reverence, protected it from view, identified it with a unique covering of pure blue cloth when being transported, and spoke of the voice of God coming from between the cherubim. It also explains the superstitious use of the ark here in 1 Samuel.

D. The Atonement Seat of the Ark

Covering the ark was a slab of solid gold with two gold cherubim upon the top. This construction, called "the mercy seat" (King James), "the atonement cover" (NIV), "the throne of mercy" (Jerusalem Bible), was looked upon by Israel as the place where God was symbolically "enthroned above the cherubim" (Ps. 99:1) with the ark as His footstool (1 Chron.28:2). It was called kapporet. This Hebrew noun is used 27 times in the Old Testament and always refers to the golden cover of the sacred chest. However, the word is not related to "mercy" and except as a symbolic throne, was not a "seat". The translation "mercy seat" does not sufficiently express the

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most important fact about it: the lid of the ark was the place where the blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement. The word is derived from the root word meaning "to atone." "Place of atonement" or "the Propitiatory" would perhaps be a more expressive name. It means "to atone by offering a substitute." It is an expression of innocent life given for guilty life. The kapporet was thus the place where, because of the blood of the sin offering sprinkled upon it and in front of it, God granted reconciliation to His people, forgiving all their sins. Combining both the royal and religious meanings, it was the "throne of grace" (Heb. 4:16).

E. The Atonement Seat and the Contents of the Ark

We earlier noted that three things came to be kept in the ark: the gold jar of manna, the rod of Aaron that blossomed, and the tables of the covenant commandments. All three of these represented a rejection of God by Israel. The people had rejected God's provision when they despised the manna. They had refused God's appointed leadership forcing the miracle of the rod, and they had disobeyed His laws which bound them to Him in the covenant relationship. But God dramatically demonstrated His grace. Once a year the sacrificial blood was placed on the lid over the contents. This signaled that God had provided a substitutionary payment of the penalty for the nation's sins of rejection and had Himself cleansed her from defilement.

F. The One Who Is Our Mercy Seat

The grand reality "that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:19) is the antitype to the mercy seat. The Greek translation of kapporet is hilasterion, which means "that which expiates, appeases, or propitiates". Propitiation means that which appeases the wrath of God for sins and obtains His favor. The word hilasterion is used in the New Testament in Romans 3:25 of Christ, and in Hebrews 9:5 of the mercy seat. Christ = the mercy seat. Jesus Christ is the multiple fulfillment of the types. He is at the same time the sacrifice, the priest, the altar and the place where the propitiation is made. The same concept is expressed in 1 John 2:2 and 4:10, although a different (but related) word is used. When we are invited to "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace," it is Christ through Whom we come and to Whom we come. Christ Himself is the Throne of Grace (Heb. 4:16). The penitent publican in Jesus' story was thinking of the blood-sprinkled mercy seat when he prayed, "God, be merciful to me (be propitiated toward -- he uses the verb form of this word), the sinner" (Lk. 18:13). Technically, no one needs to pray this prayer today because God has already been propitiated once-for-all by the blood of Calvary. The sinner must accept Jesus' death as his own personal propitiation.

F. Israel's Mistake about the Ark

The most fascinating yet saddest episode of the history of the ark was when the people confused the ark as a symbol of God's Presence with the reality of His Presence (note 1 Sam.4:4 -- "of the LORD of hosts who sits above the cherubim") and superstitiously carried the ark into battle, where it was captured by the Philistines.

The Tabernacle was first set up in the Promised Land at Gilgal (Jos. 4:19, 20; 9:6), but before the death of Joshua, it was erected at Shiloh (Jos. 18:1; 19:51). Here it remained as the national sanctuary throughout the time of the Judges, where the ark was used as an oracle (Jud. 20:27). The external construction of the tabernacle may have been repaired and changed at this time, for it seemed that doors, strictly so-called, had been added to the entrance curtain (1 Sam.3:15). This may be why it was sometimes called the temple (1 Sam. 1:9; 3:3).

The two sons of Eli were there with the ark of the covenant of God. Only the Levitical family could carry the ark according to Exodus. Eli himself was blind, 98 years old and terribly overweight so there was no way that Eli could carry the ark. So they got the two sons of the high priest and probably two other priests or Levites to carry the ark. Now remember these are the same two young men who have carried on the abominations in the tabernacle of God, who have lain with the women who have come to serve at the gate, and who have in greed carried on an extortion racket with the people who brought sacrifices. But Israel thought they were doing it right. They got the religious leaders out in front.

G. The Capture of the Ark

The Philistines said, "We will fight before we will be enslaved. You have to admire that. The Philistines fought and Israel, with their ark, was defeated. Thirty-thousand died. Every ancient

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writer, both Biblical and extra-biblical, attest to the great number of deaths in ancient warfare. This was one of those examples. The ark was taken and the two sons of Eli died.

Eli apparently died of a heart attack when he was told of his sons' deaths and of the ark being taken. He had been Israel's judge for the last 40 years of his life (cf. Dt. 17:9-12; 19:17 where judge and priest work closely together). Then we are told as a little parenthesis that his daughter-in-law, hearing the news, gave birth to a child prematurely. She had no significance politically except the name of her child was a perfect commentary on the events of the time. She named the child "Ichabod," for the word means "the glory has departed." Later Ezekiel used the same words (not as a proper name) when he told Israel that they were going to go into captivity and no matter how much they tried to keep the temple, it was going to be destroyed because the glory had departed from it because of their sin (Ezek. 10:18; cf. Hos. 10:5-6). Jeremiah foretold a brighter day when they would no longer think of the ark in connection with the presence of God (Jer. 3:16-17).

III. THE ARK IN PHILISTINE COUNTRY 5:

The Philistines brought the ark from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Now there were five major cities and five lords of the Philistines. They were Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza. Shiloh was just north of Jerusalem. They had fought the battle at Aphek on the coast. In Ashdod, a Philistine royal city, the ark was placed in the temple of a pagan god, Dagon, who was their primary god, the son of El and the father of Baal. Archaeologists have thought the idol to have been a fish god, and more recently, a grain god. Many scholars picture him as half man and half fish with the bottom half a fish, and the top half the arms, hands, and face of a man.

It was common for a people to place the idol of a vanquished enemy before the feet of their god in its temple as a symbol of the power of their god. Jehovah would not allow the Israelites to manipulate Him with a superstitious use of the ark, but neither would He allow the Philistines to think that their god had given them victory. The idol fell and was broken, and a plague of tumors (caused by rats?) broke out in the city. Sent to Gath, the ark caused the same plague. The Philistines sent it to Ekron, but they sent it back toward the battlefield of Ebenezer with an offering of five gold "tumors" and five gold rats according to the number of their five royal cities. When the ark arrived at Beth-shemesh, God struck dead seventy (some texts say 50,070 -- doubtful for a small town) men who dared to look into the ark! The people sent to Kiriath-jearim for men to take the ark and the ark then remained there in the house of Abinadab for twenty years (1 Sam. 7-8).

It is interesting that none of this seems to affect the Philistine interest in worshipping Dagon. That doesn't stop them at all. They do not suddenly say, "Hold up, the God of Israel was greater than the god of Dagon." They simply keep on worshipping their own god. They just pieced him back together, that was all. The danger of any people is not so much that they will fail to believe in any god but that they believe in the wrong god.

We are told in verse 6, that the hand of the Lord was heavy on the Ashdodites. Here is an interesting literary play on words. Dagon lay with its hands broken, but the hand of God was active. What happened here, I think, is bubonic plague. In chapter 6:4-5 when they sent back the ark they sent an offering. Look at verse 5. "...make likenesses of your tumors and likenesses of your rats." Ashdod was on the seacoast and many scholars feel that what you have here was an infestation brought by rats from ships, something like bubonic plague that they know is spread by rats and can create terrible tumors.

In verse 8 they sent it to Gath. This was another major city but it was inland and not on the seacoast. Lo and behold, the same thing happened. The rats and the tumors...the same problem came about. So they sent it to Ekron, another major city of the Philistines. The people there said, "They have brought the ark of the God of Israel around to kill us...." So they said, "Send away the ark of the God of Israel and let it return to its place...."

IV. THE ARK IS RETURNED TO ISRAEL 6:1-16

Notice something here. The Philistines evidently knew the Word of God. Look at chapter 6, verse 6. When the ark went down into one of the Philistine towns the elders said, "Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? When He had severely dealt with them did they not allow the people to go, and they departed?" They knew what had happened four hundred years before. They knew that God had delivered Israel. They had been there quite a few years now, and

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the Israelites had evidently told them the story. They knew of God's deliverance. But again, they thought in their idolatry that it was the ark that had done this. So they were frightened. However, their desire for freedom was greater than their fear of the idol of the ark.

So they took a little two-wheeled cart and two milk cows and they took one who was with calf and said, "Let's see if this is just chance or if this is truly the God of Israel". They separated the calves out and said that if the cows went straight for Beth-shemesh they would know it was of God. If they did what was natural, in other words, went back to their calves, then they would know that it was just a natural plague and not caused by the ark. So they prepared the cart, selected cows that had never worn a yoke, put the cart on them, put the ark on the cart and the cows headed straight for Beth-shemesh. The ark now went to Beth-shemesh to the field of Joshua (1 Sa. 6:14). The Levites came down and put it on a large stone at Beth-shemesh.

V. AT BETH-SHEMESH AND THEN TO KIRIATH-JEARIM 6:19-21

While the ark rested at Beth-shemesh, some of the men from Beth-shemesh looked into the ark. It may have been covered over and they lifted the cover, but their curiosity and their irreverence got the best of them and they looked into the ark and, "He struck down of all the people, 50,070 men" (many manuscripts read seventy men). They sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim saying, "The Philistines have brought back the ark. Come down and take it up. We don't want it either." They were playing hot potato. The ark then went to Kiriath-jearim, very close to Jerusalem, and it stayed there for over twenty years. So the first chapter of the raiding of the ark took place.

CONCLUSION: Lessons for Today

1. Superstition can never substitute for spirituality. You cannot live an evil life and keep going to church and superstitiously think because you go to church God will take care of you.
2. The symbols of God's Presence cannot substitute for God's Presence. God despises relics. Anything can become a symbol of His Presence and it can never substitute for His Presence. A crucifix or a cross will not substitute for the Presence of God. The Lord's Table is a symbol of God's Presence, but when you think that because you have eaten that wafer you have taken God into your life, you have substituted the symbol for the thing symbolized.
3. Irreverence for the things of God is irreverence to God Himself. Though the symbol isn't the Presence, you cannot irreverently partake of the Lord's Table without judgment (1 Cor. 11:27-31). We teach our children when they are going to be baptized to never talk about being dunked or dipped (though those are legitimate translations for the word in scripture). They are never to joke about the things of God.
4. When God's people fail to witness, God becomes His own witness. Did you notice the non-missionary attitude of the Israelites? Instead of trying to win the Philistines, all they wanted to do was fight the Philistines. We ought never forget that our first job as Christians is to take the Gospel to the ends of the world and to every nation and every language. If we don't, God will get the job done somehow as He does here with the ark. The ark became His witness.
5. God is as faithful in His discipline as He is in His deliverance. The best thing God did for Israel here was let them be defeated. It would have been a terrible thing to let them win with the abomination of sin that was going on in the leadership and throughout the people. God is with you in your discipline, in your hard times and in your adversity as much as He is in the good times and in the prosperity (Heb. 12:6).
6. Jesus is still our "mercy seat".

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 4

READ LESSON 3.

1. Mark what was most interesting to you.
2. What reasons did the Israelites have for believing that the ark could help them?
3. In what ways can a church building be thought of as a wrong substitute for the Presence of God?

READ I SAMUEL 7-9.

4. What three requirements did Samuel give for revival?
5. Share with the group something in your life or family that is an "Ebenezer" to you.
6. Why did the people not want Samuel's sons to be judges over them? Who do they remind you of?
7. What three reasons did Israel give for wanting a king?
8. How did God help Samuel not to take the request for a king personally?
9. List the elements that Samuel gives as the "price" for having a monarchy.
10. What name did they call the prophets before Samuel? Why do you think they used that title?
11. Summarize the story of the first meeting with Saul in chapter 9.
12. What evidence do you see of Saul's humility?