

Failures And The Lost Ark

1 Samuel 4:1-22 June 21, 2026

One Friday night in 2013, the Union High Cougars of Roosevelt, Utah lost their football game. But they were about to lose a lot more. Their coach was waiting for them in the locker room. He let them know *all* 80 players from the varsity and junior varsity teams were cut. Right there and then they had to turn in their jerseys, helmets, and pads.¹

It wasn't because they ran the wrong plays. It wasn't because their defense wasn't good enough. It was what was happening *off* the field that drove the coach to this drastic decision. The players were disrespecting teachers, skipping and failing classes, bullying other students.²

The coach was convinced that he had to do what he could to get these young men back on track. And he firmly believed that personal character was *much* more important than athletic victory. And so, the coach handed them a letter which explained how *any* player could *earn* their jersey back again. The program wasn't shut down. Games were still on the schedule. *Who* would rise to the challenge and do what's *right* to get back in the game?

Parents were shocked, but in the end all of them agreed. One of them remarked, "building good character will make good men out of them."³ The school didn't receive a *single* parent complaint.⁴

In this text, Israel suffers a stunning defeat. It keeps getting worse. By the end, there are casualties who weren't even on the battlefield! Key players are *cut off* from God's people. It's not because the Philistines *beat* them. They were *handed over* by God. He knew this loss was necessary and the removal of bad players was necessary for the future of the nation. So He allowed His people to experience their lowest point since captivity in Egypt.⁵ But through it they - *and we* - learn that really spiritual victory means following God's leading, not trying to *use* God to do our bidding.

1 Samuel 4:1-2 - 1 Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle and camped at Ebenezer while the Philistines camped at Aphek. 2 The Philistines lined up in battle formation against Israel, and as the battle intensified, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who struck down about four thousand men on the battlefield.

The Philistines were a sea people who dominated the coastlands of Canaan.⁶ They had been an adversary of Israel throughout Judges, but they had been a problem since the Exodus. Their influence continues today because we get the word "Palestine" from the Philistines.⁷

¹ <https://www.si.com/si-wire/2013/09/25/utah-high-school-entire-football-team-suspended>

² <https://www.deseret.com/2013/9/24/20526332/taking-a-stand-union-high-coach-suspends-entire-football-team-in-lesson-about-character/>

³ <https://www.ksl.com/article/26993261>

⁴ Deseret News

⁵ Bill Arnold *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel*

⁶ Ralph Klein *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 10: 1 Samuel*

⁷ P. Kyle McCarter *1 Samuel: A New Translation With Introduction & Commentary*, Bernard Lewis *Palestine: On The History & Geography of a Name*

They were technologically advanced, particularly in weapons of war. They had iron chariots, which gave them a huge advantage in the coastal plains. But the Philistines wanted more territory, particularly the fertile hill regions east of their cities - areas populated by the Israelites.⁸

But notice: The *Israelites* went out to fight the Philistines. Why? Certainly the Philistines were a problem and a threat, but there is no judge leading this charge. No rallying cry. No word from the Lord sending them to fight. Consider what we know about the state of the nation during this time, both from the closing chapters of Judges and the opening chapters of this book.

They are *not ready* for battle. They may be in battle formation, but they had no *spiritual* formation. All the way back in Exodus, God said this:

Exodus 13:17 - ¹⁷ When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them along the road to the land of the Philistines, even though it was nearby; for God said, "The people will change their minds and return to Egypt if they face war."

God made them ready by leading them and showing them how He wanted them to fight. By *His* command, by *His* leading, in *His* timing. But here they do what seems right in their own eyes.

The *last* battle Israel fought was against themselves. It was between the tribe of Benjamin and the other tribes. And in that fight they lost 65,000 men. It was an absolute disaster. But now they think they can face Philistines.

1 Samuel 4:3-5 - ³ When the troops returned to the camp, the elders of Israel asked, "Why did the LORD defeat us today before the Philistines? Let's bring the ark of the LORD's covenant from Shiloh. Then it will go with us and save us from our enemies." ⁴ So the people sent men to Shiloh to bring back the ark of the covenant of the LORD of Armies, who is enthroned between the cherubim. Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. ⁵ When the ark of the covenant of the LORD entered the camp, all the Israelites raised such a loud shout that the ground shook.

After their defeat, the elders asked a good question. They understood that they *should* have victory over the Philistines. After all, God had *given* them this land and God had promised He would drive out their enemies and God had backed up that promise with amazing demonstrations of power in the time of Joshua and through the Judges. If they lost at Aphek, something was wrong.

But what happens *right after* they ask the question? They immediately make a plan to bring the ark to the battlefield. They do the *opposite* what the leaders did in the last battle Israel fought.

Back in Judges 20, the tribes of Israel fight against Benjamin and lose, big time. In response *they* go to where the ark was (in Bethel). And there they wept and they sat before the Lord and they fasted and they offered burnt offerings and *fellowship* offerings to God. They prayed to God,

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“Should we keep doing what we’re doing or should we stop?”⁹ And finally God says, “*This* is what I want you to do.” And then they won the victory.

God is the Decider in your life. You may want to do something for Him, you may have a plan for your own life, you may think you know the best way to gain ground for your future, but God is the Decider. He is the King. He’s in charge. And when we don’t consult Him, we shouldn’t be surprised if we find ourselves defeated instead of victorious.

But the leaders in 1 Samuel 4 have forgotten this lesson. They ask the right question, but refuse to humble themselves. They refuse to submit to *God’s* direction and opinion. Instead, they say, “Bring us the ark.” You see - they think the ark is a weapon. They’re treating it like the Nazis did in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*. Like it’s a magical talisman that will *always* work to destroy their enemies.

So they bring it in the camp and they shout a big shout. They’re trying to re-create Jericho. The ark, the shouting. But they’ve forgotten the most important piece. Our author wants *us* to see it. They’ve forgotten God’s *covenant*. He makes sure to use that word *four* times in three verses.

It is the ark *of the covenant*. The covenant of the LORD of Armies. It’s *His* army, not theirs. And He has not commanded them to fight. The ark is not a piece of ordinance. It is God’s throne. It is His footstool. His podium¹⁰ from which He communicates *His* guidance, *His* precepts, *His* glory.

Notice who brings the ark: Hophni and Phinehas. Two men *totally* out of covenant with God. But they people aren’t thinking of covenant. They say, “Let’s bring the ark...then *it* will save us.”

So two spiritual principles I want us to put in our hearts from this scene. First, God’s power is not *wielded* by our will. Here’s an easy example: There are people out there who claim they are faith healers. They act as though they can *wield* the power of God to heal whenever they want. One wonders why they don’t spend their time going from hospital to hospital rather than conference to conference. But God’s power is not wielded. He is not beholden to our whims.

And second, the Israelites thought this was a good idea. And there was a *lot* of hype. So much hype the ground shook. But it was all empty. *Hype* is not what we’re going for in the Christian life or in church ministry. Something we’re doing may seem like a good idea to us, but is it a good idea to the Holy Spirit? In Acts 15, the leaders of the Church wrote about some decisions they made and said, “It seems good to the Holy Spirit *and* to us.” God leading. God involved. Not just us doing something we think is awesome and expecting God to pay the bill, but submitted to *His* opinion.

1 Samuel 4:6-11 - ⁶ The Philistines heard the sound of the war cry and asked, “What’s this loud shout in the Hebrews’ camp?” When the Philistines discovered that the ark of the LORD had entered the camp, ⁷ they panicked. “A god has entered their camp!” they said. “Woe to us! Nothing like this has happened before. ⁸ Woe to us! Who will rescue us from these

⁹ Judges 20:24-28

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magnificent gods? These are the gods that slaughtered the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. ⁹ Show some courage and be men, Philistines! Otherwise, you'll serve the Hebrews just as they served you. Now be men and fight!" ¹⁰ So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and each man fled to his tent. The slaughter was severe—thirty thousand of the Israelite foot soldiers fell. ¹¹ The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

This was a *total* loss. They lost 30,000 soldiers. They lost their Tabernacle leadership. They lost the ark of God. And where it says, "Each man fled to his own tent," that doesn't just mean retreat, it means they abandoned military service altogether.¹¹ In verse 2, Israel was "defeated." In verse 10, they were *slaughtered*.¹² In fact, our author uses the same word for the defeat in verse 10 that the Philistines used when talking about the "plagues" of Egypt.¹³

Did you notice the things the Philistines said? They knew *some* of the story, but they were wrong about all the details. They don't understand the God of Israel.

We live in a society that is less and less familiar with the story of the Bible and the truth of the Gospel. We can't assume people know Who Jesus really was and what He really said. We certainly can't expect them to *act* like Christians if they don't even know Who Christ is. And so we want to grow in *grace* toward those who do not know *and* we need to be serious about proclaiming the *full* truth of the Gospel as we present it. And we present it both in word and in deed. We don't want to be Christians the way these Israelites were Israelites. We can't just wear a uniform and call it good.

One of the Union High School parents said at first he was concerned about the coach's decision to penalize the whole team. But after getting an understanding of what was *really* going on he said, "If there is not unity with me and the coach, then I become part of the problem."¹⁴

God *wants* victory for us. But He wants righteousness more. He'll allow defeat if it means we'll get the message and turn back to Him, rather than think we're the captains and kings of our own lives.

1 Samuel 4:12-15 - ¹² That same day, a Benjaminite man ran from the battle and came to Shiloh. His clothes were torn, and there was dirt on his head. ¹³ When he arrived, there was Eli sitting on his chair beside the road waiting, because he was anxious about the ark of God. When the man entered the city to give a report, the entire city cried out. ¹⁴ Eli heard the outcry and asked, "Why this commotion?" The man quickly came and reported to Eli. ¹⁵ At that time Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes didn't move because he couldn't see.

The *warcry* was nothing but empty hype. The result of going into a battle God didn't send them to was not the shout of victory, but now a terrible *outcry* of anguish and sorrow.

¹¹ David Toshio Tsumura *The New International Commentary On The Old Testament: The First Book of Samuel*

¹² Ronald Youngblood *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 3: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel*

¹³ Robert Alter *The David Story*

¹⁴ Deseret News

Aphek was 22 miles from Shiloh.¹⁵ This fellow ran a marathon to bring word. It was likely the Philistines would continue down that coastal road to Shiloh and destroy the city.

Eli knew his sons took the ark. Hour after hour, he *sat* in darkness, his heart *trembling* with fear.¹⁶ It's interesting, he's not really concerned about his sons, but the ark. In his heart he *knew* they shouldn't bring it. But, like so many other bad things he let happen, he let this happen, too. We have a duty of following the Lord rather than going our own way or doing what's easy.

Eli is the leader of Israel. He's the judge. He's Hophni and Phineas' dad. He's responsible for the ark, for the army, for the nation. But the man most personally affected by the loss is the last to hear.¹⁷

1 Samuel 4:16-18 - ¹⁶ The man said to Eli, "I'm the one who came from the battle. I fled from there today." "What happened, my son?" Eli asked. ¹⁷ The messenger answered, "Israel has fled from the Philistines, and also there was a great slaughter among the people. Your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are both dead, and the ark of God has been captured." ¹⁸ When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backward off the chair by the city gate, and since he was old and heavy, his neck broke and he died. Eli had judged Israel forty years.

Eli is *literally* dethroned from his position. Instead of leading God's people into great spirituality, he's sitting, unable to see. He had turned a blind eye to the sins of his sons, now he can't see at all. When he fell, his own weight killed him. Why was he heavy? Because for years he had been eating the meat his sons stole from the faithful of Israel. But, sadly, the chain of tragedy has one more link before the day is done.

1 Samuel 4:19-22 - ¹⁹ Eli's daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant and about to give birth. When she heard the news about the capture of God's ark and the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband, she collapsed and gave birth because her labor pains came on her. ²⁰ As she was dying, the women taking care of her said, "Don't be afraid. You've given birth to a son!" But she did not respond or pay attention. ²¹ She named the boy Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel," referring to the capture of the ark of God and to the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband. ²² "The glory has departed from Israel," she said, "because the ark of God has been captured."

The real problem was not that the ark *itself* was gone. It's that the ark represented God's *presence* among His people.¹⁸ And if God was willing to let Israel be defeated they've got a much bigger problem than having Philistines next door. The ark was gone, but God could fix that. But what do we do when we're not in *fellowship* with God? *That's* a much greater problem than any circumstantial issue we face in life.

¹⁵ Dale Ralph Davis *1 Samuel: Looking On The Heart*

¹⁶ Youngblood

¹⁷ Klein

¹⁸ Youngblood

See - if you're a Christian, God gives us victory through Jesus Christ, Who said we can be of good cheer, because He has overcome the world. But when we disconnect our hearts and our lives from Jesus, we should expect defeat.

So, if I've fallen out of fellowship with God, how do I get back into it? It's simple: *Get back into it!* The ark of God is going to be displaced for *20 years*. And *finally*, you know what we read? "Then the whole house of Israel *longed* for the Lord."¹⁹ And Samuel comes back on scene to say, "You want to return to the Lord? Then set your heart on Him and worship Him and stop being idolators."

The coach of Union High School gave a letter to all those players. Here's how you get back on the team. It was all basic stuff. Character. Serving others. Behavior that aligned with the values of the school. Sadly, when it was time to field a team for homecoming, not all players met the criteria.²⁰ They *could* have. But it was a personal decision. A life choice. Some chose to do it, others wouldn't.

In 2012, the Cougars had a *different* coach. He led the team to an 0-8 season. In 2014, the season after the new coach made his controversial decision, the Cougars went 9-3.²¹ Character matters. Direction matters.

God wants victory for us, but He wants victory on *His* terms, by *His* leading. Don't get into battle formation without first being sure you've got the right spiritual formation. Don't think of the Christian faith as God simply co-signing on everything we want to do, whether that's in line with His precepts or not. Instead, our goal is to stay in obedient fellowship with God. To abide in Christ.

Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, neither can you unless you remain in Christ. Remain in Him so that when He appears we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. He is our Captain and King. He is the Director. He is the God Who dwells among us to accomplish *His* will in our lives as we love Him and trust Him and submit to Him.

¹⁹ 1 Samuel 7:2

²⁰ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/why-a-high-school-football-coach-suspended-nearly-every-player-on-team/>

²¹ <https://www.maxpreps.com/ut/roosevelt/union-cougars/football/history/>