

**INTRO:** It's easy to take our blessings for granted. We often don't realize just how good we have it. This was certainly true of OT Israel in their own relationship with God.

## STORY

4:1 *"And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer,<sup>1</sup> and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. The Philistines drew up in a line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle."* The whole story starts in the context of God's word coming through Samuel's word to all Israel. Sadly, no one seemed to care. The defeat surprised Israel and the elders. But it shouldn't surprise us, not from chapters 2-3. God's people suffer when their leaders sin.

4:3 *"And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, 'Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.'" They admit it was the Lord who defeated them. They even ask the right question, "We got thrashed. Why did God do that to us?" Of course, after reading chapters 2-3, to readers it's obvious; but the leaders are oblivious. Yet it doesn't dawn on them to ask Samuel the prophet for God's word about what they did wrong or what they should do next. They assume they're right what went wrong. It wasn't a moral wrong. It was a ritual wrong. They went to battle, but left the mascot on the bus. Their answer is the ark as a lucky charm.*

Their question assumes that they thought the Lord was already at the battle. They don't get the ark to get God's presence. They were painfully aware that God was already there. Their issue was not that God was absent spatially, but that God was against them spiritually. The Lord was there, He just defeated them. So in bringing the ark, they're not saying, 'Oh, we forgot to invite God, we didn't include him in our plans.' Their answer is more like superstition, "oh, we needed the ark. Or maybe, God needed the ark..." Or maybe, "we need some of that old-time religion,<sup>2</sup> like in Numbers 10:35 *"Whenever the ark set out Moses said, 'Arise, O Lord, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you.'*" Or maybe, "if we bring the ark, then God will have to deliver us because then we'll have the VISIBLE symbol of his presence on our side, and he will have to save face. Then we'll have the upper hand... on God." Whatever their precise mentality, this general approach is why the ESV has the translation right in v.3, *"Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies."* The ark will save us. The ark will give us the upper hand, because the ark will twist God's arm. That's the advantage we need, as if the ark is a lucky charm, a rabbit's foot, a mystical guarantee with God. Superstition.<sup>3</sup>

They also call it *"the ark of the covenant of the Lord."* They remember the ark, they even remember the Lord, but they forget the covenant. After all, what was inside the ark? The tablets of the Ten

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<sup>1</sup> See 7:12, the name of the place may have been given later than this narrative time, but the readers would have already known where it was.

<sup>2</sup> Suggested to me by reading D. Davis' phrase "old time deliverances" (FOTB, 53).

<sup>3</sup> R.D. Bergen disagrees, "Their solution, bringing the ark of the Lord's covenant into the battle arena, suggests that they were attempting to demonstrate in a tangible way their commitment to the covenant. Alternatively, it might have been an attempt by the elders to twist God's arm into helping them instead of trying to find out the reason or God's displeasure... The Hebrew syntax in 4:3 suggests instead that the elders believed that the Lord, not the ark, would go with them and save them from their enemies.... The problem with Israel was not the bad theology of the elders—faith in things rather than faith in God—but the sins of 'Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas'..." (NAC 90, 91). But the textual note in v.4 *"the ark of the Lord of Hosts who sits on the cherubim"* seems emphatic that the Lord, in both his power and mercy, is distinct from the ark as an object in itself. Baldwin (TOTC) is closer to the mark, "They were... wrong in thinking that a parade of the ark of the covenant would compensate for their neglect of the Lord's ethical demands.... To think that the presence of the ark with them would reverse their fortunes without any change of heart in Israel's leaders was a measure of their insensitivity to spiritual things" (69). However, Tsumura agrees with the present exposition on the theological significance and implications of v.4, "The phrase 'the Lord of Hosts who sits on the cherubim' is the full title for Yahweh, the sovereign King of the universe; with this full title, the narrator ironically hints at the people's confidence in the ark rather than in Yahweh whom the ark symbolizes" (NICOT, 192), and so on the translation of the third person singular Tsumura concludes that the pronoun "'it' is preferable, for it was seemingly the cultic object, not Yahweh himself, that they put their trust in" (192). So also D.R. Davis, who calls this superstitious "rabbit-foot theology" (FOTB, 54), an accurate but unfortunately outdated image from the 1980's.

Commandments, which the priests had been breaking right and left. And you're going to bring THAT as the good luck charm? Good luck! And let's not forget the end of chapter 3, *all Israel from Dan to Beersheeba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord.*" Everyone knew there was a God-ordained authority on the covenant to consult. If they had asked, Samuel would have told them that defeat before their enemies was a curse for disobedience to the covenant. **Dt 28:25** *"the Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You shall go out one way against them and flee seven ways before them..."* (cf. Dt 32:30).

Yet even as they admit that it was the Lord who defeated them, they still think they need *"the ark to come and save us from the power of our enemies."* But they just said the Lord is the one who defeated them. So who do they really need to be saved from? They've got a way bigger problem than the power of their enemies; their problem is the power of their own covenant Lord, who is angry over their own sins. What they need is not the ark of the Lord. They need the Lord of the ark.

But the elders forge ahead in v.4 with their own superstitious, pseudo-religious solution, never consulting the covenant or the prophet. *So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim.*" The narrator makes sure to distinguish between the Lord and the ark. The Lord is enthroned on the cherubim of the ark, but he is not limited to the ark or manipulated by the ark. He is above the ark, not inside it. And at the end of v.4 we get the ominous note *"And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas were there with the ark of the covenant of God."* Uh oh. We forgot about them. But God didn't. They're about to get their comeuppance. And look at how the elders unwittingly walk right into God's plan. The very superstition they think is gaining the Lord's favor, is precisely the occasion God uses to move Eli's sons into position to suffer the judgment God had decreed for their sins (2:12, 34). Eli's sons will escort the ark right into the teeth of the battle. Everyone is now right where God wants them, even though no one is doing anything against their own will.

**4:5-9** *As soon as the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, 'What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean? and when they learned that the ark of the Lord had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid, for they said, 'A god has come into the camp.' And they said, 'Woe to us! for nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness. Take courage, and be men, o Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight.'*

Israel gives a thundering shout, mighty even. But remember, *"not by might shall a man prevail."* What's the shouting mean? To Israel, it means "we've already won. We've got the ark." To the reader, though, it's full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, because no matter how loud they shout, the Lord is angry with Israel. And yet it's the Philistines who say what Israel should say. The Philistines say "woe to us," but really it's Israel, and especially Eli's sons, who should be saying "woe to us". The Philistines are terrified of the ark, like the superstitious people they are. The Philistines know they need to be saved from God, but the Israelites don't know that they too need to be saved from God. And look at the Philistine's theology of Yahweh. It's confused, polytheistic, historically jumbled, but at least they know he's the God of the exodus. That's better theology that we've heard from any Israelite, since Hannah's song in chapter 2. They know Yahweh struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues, which is how He freed Israel from slavery. Philistia is not interested in an encore. Philistine freedom is on the line; so they rally the troops.

10-11 “So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home.<sup>4</sup> And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died. Those two words, defeated and fled, are trigger words that should have reminded any Jew of **Dt 28:25** “the Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You shall go out one way against them and flee seven ways before them....” God said this would happen if they violated the covenant. The priest violated the covenant—for forty years under Eli’s administration—not to mention the century of the Judges. The beat down was so bad that the soldiers don’t just surrender. They disband the army. In this context, “every man to his tent” means “back to civilian life.” After all, there went the lucky charm—Philistines just poached the ark.

And that raises an unsettling question. In Canaanite mythology, if you steal the enemy’s god, then you conquer the people and prove their god powerless. God did that to Egypt in the Exodus. But for that to happen to Yahweh would have been unthinkable.<sup>5</sup> Yet here we are. The Philistines have stolen the ark. From all appearances, Yahweh lost. How will God or Israel ever recover from THAT...unless, of course, God actually meant it to happen and he has a plan for it...<sup>6</sup> (cf. Ps 78:56-61).

V.12-18 “A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head. When he arrived, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God.”<sup>7</sup> Eli is almost totally blind, but he’s still keeping watch for the ark, still hoping this battle would turn out well. It’s not really clear what it means for Eli’s heart to tremble over the ark. Does the ark scare him like it does the Philistines? Or does he fear for the ark’s security, since it’s Eli’s responsibility?<sup>8</sup> It’s not clear. What is clear is that the that his heart should have trembled for the word of God. This is the same phrase Isaiah uses in Isa 66:2. God dwells with those who tremble at his word. Instead, look what happens in v.13.

“And when the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out. When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, ‘What is this uproar?’” Stop right there. Notice the irony. When the ark arrived in v.5 and the Israelites give a shout, the Philistines asked what it meant. Now there’s another uproar, but this time it’s not about Israel’s strength. It’s about their sorrow. “Then the man hurried and came and told Eli. Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set so that he could not see. And the man said to Eli, ‘I am he who has come from the battle; I fled from the battle today’ (there’s that word again, fled). And he said, ‘How did it go, my son?’ [Really, you gotta ask that, from an Israelite who fled from a battle?] He who brought the news answered and said, ‘Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a **great defeat** among the people [there are those words again]. Your two sons, also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured.’ As soon as he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years.”

Here again, we see that Eli’s blindness is not just physical. It’s spiritual. It’s not the battle. It’s not the Benjaminite. It’s not even his boys. It’s the ark...still with the ark. Now, this looks spiritual—he’s more

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<sup>4</sup> “To flee to his own tent is not simply to retreat, but to abandon military service altogether” (Tsumura, *NICOT*, 195, referencing McCarter [AB, 107], Judges 20:8; 1Sam 13:2; 2Sam 20:1; 1Kgs 12:16).

<sup>5</sup> Tsumura, 195.

<sup>6</sup> “McCarter holds that ‘the theological purpose of the ark narrative as a whole’ is to deal with the problem of ‘How can the Philistines have defied the power of Yahweh and prevailed?’ The narrative affirms that ‘Yahweh was in control of the events from the beginning....The ark was captured because Yahweh had chosen to abandon Israel on account of the wickedness of the Elides’ (Tsumura, *NICOT*, 187).

<sup>7</sup> Baldwin is too rosy in the assessment that “Eli had his priorities right” (TOTC, 71).

<sup>8</sup> So Bergen (NAC, 93).

concerned with the ark than his offspring—how godly! But it's not spiritual. It's **superstitious**. To the day he dies, he is more concerned with the ark of God than he is with the God of the ark, more concerned with the ark of the covenant than with the covenant inside the ark. And look at how he dies. "**His neck was broken.**" Scripture does not waste words. This is an ironic reference to sacrificial practice, **Ex 13:13; 34:20** "every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you do not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem." God did not redeem Eli, God broke his neck. "For he was old and heavy." Heavy is *kabod*, glorious. He stole God's glory by eating the fat reserved for God, so he himself got fat, and he dies under the weight of his own stolen "glory".<sup>9</sup>

**2:19-22** "Now his daughter in law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. And when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. And about the time of her death [she died right after childbirth] the women attending her said to her, 'Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son.' But she did not answer or pay attention. And she named the child Ichabod, saying, 'The glory has departed [been exiled]<sup>10</sup> from Israel!' because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. And she said, 'The glory has departed [been exiled] from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.'" The narrator repeats her words for emphasis, like italics. Here's what all this means—God's glory has left the nation, and the only one who realizes it is a pregnant woman, jilted by her hypocrite husband, dying in childbirth. And from what we know of 1Sam 1-3, it's all because of ministerial infidelity. The priests honored themselves above God. Instead of glorifying their Lord, they gratified their lusts. And the longer God lets them go, the harder they fall.

## POINT

**God opposes His people when their leaders neglect His word to treat his symbols with superstition.** God expects church leaders to lead with His word, not their assumptions or superstitions. When we take God for granted by neglecting his word to us in Christ and the New Covenant, he sets himself against us for a time.

## APPS

**1. The glory of a local church is God's presence by His word, not our power (cf. 1Cor 14:24-25).** We forfeited God's presence when we sinned against his word in Gen 3. But he pursued us. He redeemed Israel from slavery in the exodus for the purpose of making himself present with them. In **Exod 40:34-35** *The glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle*" (2x), but only after seven occurrences of the phrase "*as the Lord commanded Moses.*" Moses did everything God's way, obeying God's word. Only then did God's glory fill the tabernacle, and that is the climax and goal of redemption in Exodus. In **1Kgs 8:11** "*the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord*". That is the whole point of the temple—the presence and glory of the Lord. When we disobey God's word, it alienates us from Him, and Him from us. Israel alienated God by her disobedience to His word so consistently that God's glory leaves the temple in Ezekiel 10. The exile of the tabernacle here in 1Sam 4 foreshadows Israel's eventual exile from the land centuries later.

But God would promise to restore His glory among His people. **Isa 60** *Arise, shine, for our light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples, but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. All the*

<sup>9</sup> "Eli was a man with much social weight/significance; because of his practice of eating unauthorized sacrificial portions...he was also 'heavy'; finally, as a result of the sins he permitted in his own life and household, Eli was a burden that weighed down and ultimately brought disaster upon Israel...With the deaths of the patriarch and his two sons the *kbd*—honor, weight, burden—of the Elide dynasty was gone" (Bergen, NAC, 94).

<sup>10</sup> "The term *was exiled* (*gālāh*) does not simply mean 'has departed'" (Tsumura, 201).

*nations shall come to your light, and king to the brightness of your shining. Isa 60:7, 9, 13 I will beautify my beautiful house...he has made you beautiful... and I will make the place of my feet glorious.” He showed Ezekiel a vision in Ezek 43:1-5 where “the glory of the Lord filled the temple” in the end times. He promised to fill the second temple after the exile in Haggai 2:9 “I will fill this house with glory...The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts.”*

When Jesus is presented at the temple, Simeon said Lk 2 “my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” Jesus is our glory. John said of Jesus “The word became flesh and **tabernacled** among us, and we have seen his **glory** John 1:14. Jesus said tear down this temple and in 3 days I’ll raise it again, but he was speaking of the temple of his body, John 2:18. God would eventually destroy his own temple in AD 70, but by then it had become clear through Peter that “you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...[And we] proclaim his excellencies who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.” And so we join with the saints in heaven to sing the song of Rev 5:12 “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. Our glory is God’s presence, in Christ, by His word and Spirit. But God makes himself present only where His word is proclaimed, trusted, and obeyed.

When God is present with His church by His word, that church is glorious, radiant, beautiful, full of splendor. And it’s not because we are powerful. It’s because God is present by His word. Even visitors will know it in 1Cor 14:24, “If all prophesy [speak God’s word so everyone can understand it], and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.” That...that, is glorious (cf. Rev 11:19, 21:22-23). And it’s because of God’s presence, not our power.

**2. Mere theism, even mono-theism, is no safeguard against superstition and self-direction.** Apart from God’s word, theism evaporates into superstition. The elders in Israel were theists—monotheists. One God. Yet they are inept at thinking through life theologically. They think theistically, but not biblically. They take God into account, but not as he reveals Himself by His word. That problem is rampant in evangelical churches today. Most churches today are monotheistic. And yet, many of the leaders of those mono-theistic churches have no idea how to apply biblical criteria or commands to issues of church leadership and decision-making. If you are a Christian—a member of the New Covenant, a believer in the covenant Lord Christ Jesus—then your first instinct in tragedy, transition, or confusion should be, what does the word of the covenant tell us? What does the Bible say? What are the biblical criteria for thinking through this decision wisely, humbly, faithfully, obediently?

**3. Just because a so-called church lives on an endowment doesn’t mean it’s alive with God’s presence.** A Christ-less church is a lifeless church. A church that ignores the New Covenant, cut in the blood of Christ shed for our sins, confirmed in Christ’s resurrection, and applied by God’s Spirit writing God’s law on our hearts—you ignore any part of that, and the church’s life shrivels and calcifies, no matter how much money is in the bank. There are many so-called churches that have forfeited God’s presence because the leaders have neglected God’s new covenant word in favor of treating his symbols with superstition. More on that in a moment.

**4. God can suffer a public “defeat” to disabuse His people of self-deceit (D.R. Davis, 55).** The ark was captured by Canaanites. Talk about making your ears tingle—that was an epic scandal in Israel.

When a foreign country captured your gods, you were conquered and your god was discredited. But Yahweh can take care of his reputation just fine no matter where the ark is, as we'll see next week in chapter 5. The removal of God's presence and glory from a church is not an ultimate defeat for God. It is a rebuke and a wake-up call to the church. The truth is, God can and will suffer an apparent defeat at the hands of his enemies in order to disabuse his own people of spiritual self-deceit. In fact, that is exactly what God did at the cross of Christ, which leads to our next application.

**5. The ark in enemy hands foreshadows Christ crucified and buried.**<sup>11</sup> The ark goes into exile, like David, like Israel, like Jesus.... Jesus goes into exile at the very beginning of his ministry in his wilderness temptation, only to defeat the devil there. Then Jesus goes into exile on the cross and into the grave, the very place where Satan thought he had finally gotten the upper hand. The ark was the symbol of God's presence, and Jesus as our Immanuel, God with us, becomes God exiled, forsaken, crucified, dead, buried...only to rise from the grave, return from His exile, and renew God's presence and glory among His people. Exile is not the end. And now we ourselves have followed Jesus into exile. Peter calls Christians elect exiles of the dispersion all over the world. But we are not anywhere that our Christ has not first gone before us, and He is with us even now, by His word and Spirit. The ark will not remain in enemy hands forever, and neither would Jesus remain on the cross or in the grave forever. He rose from the dead, ascended to God's right hand, and he will return to judge the living and the dead. He will consign the unrepentant to everlasting torment in Hell, which is the only fitting punishment for sinning against the eternal majesty and holiness of God. And then Jesus will cleanse the earth and make all things new, right, better, perfect for all those of any color or culture who turn from their sins to trust in Him. And we call you to do that now. Turn from your sin, your self-direction, your superstition, and pay attention to God's call in the Bible to trust in Jesus' blood to atone for your sins and his righteousness to reconcile you to God. This Jesus, whom you crucified by your sins, God has made both Lord and Christ.... Of course, that message may make you uncomfortable. The reason for that discomfort is the truth that....

**6. Not all spirituality (spiritual concern) is saving.** Eli trembled for the ark. He was spiritual. But he was not pleasing to God. Superstition is not spiritual maturity. They treated the ark like a lucky charm, but they had a prophet who was regularly receiving God's word, and they never even gave him the time of day. Never did they ask, "what should we do about the Philistines?" Never did they ask the prophet with God's word, "Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?"<sup>12</sup> Friend, the less you read and trust God's word in Scripture, the more you will fall for anything else, superstition or otherwise. God has made his word clear. The Ten Commandments summarize his moral expectations of us. They are unchanging because God is unchanging. They are timeless because God is timeless. We have all broken all of those commandments because we are all sinful. And therefore we want to ignore God's word because it scares us, intimidates us, even threatens us. But the good news of Jesus is that He has perfectly obeyed all God's commands, and thoroughly endured all God's curse, for all those who will ever turn from their sins and trust in Jesus, no matter what sins they've committed. And that is the only spiritual concern that is saving. Every other spirituality amounts to nothing more than the superstition of Eli, even when they involved the symbols of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

**7. The symbols of the NC are not lucky charms.** The ark was a visible symbol. So are the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. But they don't work like magic charms or spells, or just by the mere working of the work. This text is one reason among many that we are not sacramentalists. Sacramentalism

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<sup>11</sup> This idea was suggested to me by Tsumura's thought on 5:1, "a people whose God had fallen into enemy hands was assumed to be thoroughly conquered."

<sup>12</sup> Tsumura, *NICOT* 188.

is nothing more than superstition using biblical symbols. Sacramentalism says there is saving grace in the symbols of baptism and communion simply by the outward performance of them or outward participation in them. That is wrong, deceiving, and potentially condemning. This is one reason Baptists have historically avoided the language of sacraments and instead used the language of ordinances. We do not practice baptism and the Lord's Supper because we think there is inherent grace in them regardless of the faith or repentance of the one participating in them. That's sacramentalism. Christians practice baptism and the Lord's Supper because Jesus ordained them for all those who repent and believe—they are ordinances. And because Jesus ordained these symbols only for those who repent and believe, those who participate in them must be marked by ongoing repentance from sin and faith in Jesus. If you are saved, you should be baptized and you should take the Lord's Supper. But just because you are baptized and take the Lord's Supper, doesn't mean you get saving grace through those ordinances. You get saving grace only through a faith in Christ that moves you to lifelong repentance from your own sins. Roman Catholic sacramentalism attempts to sanctify superstition in order to consolidate power.

**8. Personal prayer and Bible-reading are not means to manipulate God into giving you personal success (D.R. Davis, 54).** Having a quiet time in the morning is not the secret to having a successful day. It is the essential food for your soul and the means by which you commune with Christ as an end in itself. God is not merely useful. He is holy, sovereign, righteous. **God is not an algorithm created by your user preferences and habits.** He is not a smart phone, ready for any way you'd like to use him, ready to accommodate any app you'd like to use to customize him, but happy just to be in your pocket while you don't feel your need for him. He's not a GPS that will find any destination you determine and give you directions for how to get where you want to go. God is not a spiritual technology to master and then manipulate. He is not a life gadget or a life hack. He is God in the fullest sense of that word. We have a phrase that we like to apply to ourselves: I am my own man. That means no one tells me what to think, or who to be. I am my own man. Well, God is His own God. No one tells him who to be or how to think or what to do. God is personal, objective, totally independent, self-existent, self-sustaining, self-sufficient. He has no needs, weaknesses, or deficiencies. He is more concerned with His glory than yours. He is sovereign, holy, righteous, transcendent, unchangeable. And He is more important than you. God is more important than you or me. God is more important than us.

Now Christian, you might be thinking right now, "I know all this. Why does he talk to us like this? He's preaching to the choir. I don't think of God like a smart phone. That's ridiculous. He must be talking to non-Christians. In fact, I think I'll pull out my smart phone right now; that will be more useful to me than this part of the sermon." OK, Christian, fair enough—you don't think of God like an i-phone; but do you treat Him like one? When do you pray? Why do you pray? What do you pray about? Do you ever pray just because you want to be with God, to praise Him or thank Him or confess to him, talk to Him, and only because you need him for something really quick? Why do you read your Bible—to figure out how to solve your problem, to make your life easier, to have more success, or do you read the Bible just because you want to get to know God in Christ better, and you want to hear His voice? Yes we all need God, we all need to pray, we should pray about everything. But if all we're doing is praying about everything that we want, everything we think God should give us, our success, our prosperity, our feelings, our stuff—then you are treating him like a smart phone, even if you would never talk about him that way. You are the end-user, and he is the technology. There's a difference between being a consumer of Christ, and communing with Christ.

**9. Even long ministries can be poorly executed and poorly finished.** Eli judged Israel 40 years, and at the end of all those decades, there was nothing to celebrate. Ministry length and ministry legacy are two

different things. Just because Eli served in one place for a long time (with his own sons) did not make him pleasing to God. His was a long, stable, and unconverted ministry. Let's not have any of that here. Let's pray that God would keep us and especially our elders from sin, superstition, and self-deception.

**10. Sometimes God removes our current shepherds only to give us better ones.** The removal of Eli and his sons introduced a period of instability, uncertainty, even confusion and discomfort. But God was already preparing a far better leader in Samuel, who would eventually anoint David king. Our stability is not in the continuity of our human leaders. Yes, that's nice, and God uses it. But our stability is in the continuity of our Good Shepherd Christ Jesus. He will never leave us or forsake us. Under-shepherds will come and go. And yes, when they stay and their ministry is faithful, it's a huge blessing. But we will always have our Great High Priest in Heaven.

## CONCLUSION

Friends, let's beware of taking our relationship with God in Christ for granted. Let's not mistake superstition for spiritual maturity. And let's make sure that we relate to the Lord of the Covenant through the word of the covenant.

**God's glory is not dependent on the church; the church is dependent on Him.** God goes on without us. We'll see that next week in chapter five when the ark goes to the temple of Dagon and the idol Dagon ends up face down before the ark of the Lord with his hands cut off. God can carry his own cause in the world quite well without us. Meanwhile, Israel is helpless and hapless without God. If Jesus leaves, we're done here. But Jesus will go on doing His work. If we refuse to preach him, then the stones will cry out in His name. **Our security and our glory are in our God and in His Christ, not in signs and symbols.** Golden cross is not our glory. It can come down. Maybe it should.... **God's word drives history.** It is God's word that determines what happens next in Samuel. So it is today.... **God is faithful to make good on both his threats and his promises.** The church and the world should trust God's threat of judgment and his promise of salvation. **Family cannot replace the glory of God.** Phinehas's wife is not encouraged by the birth of her son when she knows that God's glory is no longer with God's people. Her sorrow is not "what kind of world am I leaving to my boy." It's "what kind of church am I leaving to my boy, if the glory departs from God's people. She's living in Canaan. She knows that. The conquest isn't complete. Her concern, then, is not that Canaan isn't a Christian country. Her concern is that God's people, Israel, no longer have God on their side. Their glory as God's people in Canaan is no longer special or secure. God has left, and he's taken his ark with him. Legacy is nothing without the power, glory, and mercy of Christ at the burning center.