**Week Four – September 13/14 – I Samuel 4**

**Introduction -** With most analogies of our relationship with God, we can end up with an idea that is much smaller and weaker than what he is actually like. Tom Richter describes some examples of these misleading and unhelpful images that we are tempted to cling to:

* God as our waiter – When all is going as it should, he gives us what we want when we want it. In return, we give him “tips” of gratitude in prayers, praise, and how we live life.
* God as our landlord – All about mutual benefit. He fixes our troubles, we pay him rent (our commitment). We can go long periods without seeing him, but we need each other.
* God as a spare tire – We live life thinking we are self-sufficient, but when a crisis comes we quickly pull out our relationship with God to fix the trouble we are experiencing.
* God as our lucky charm – We hope that our connection with God will ward off troubles before they come. We keep him around so that things are more likely to “go our way.”

Each of those images are woefully incorrect, mostly because they all have the common thread of a self-focused life instead of a God-focused life. **When you are operating with a self-centered view of God and his relationship to us, which of these four (or throw in your own analogy) are you most tempted to fall into?** In our passage tonight, we see the Israelites clinging tightly to a “lucky charm” view of God. He will allow them to experience dire consequences of their hard-hearted and self-centered ways, but in his graciousness he will teach them the true picture of himself and radiate the hope of the gospel.

**Read I Samuel 4:1-5**

**What kind of learner and discusser are you? Are you an external processor who talks things through as you figure them out? Are you a quiet, “soak it in” person who does not speak until the ideas are fully formed? Or some other type of learner/discusser? Who are some of the best question askers you know and what makes their questions so good?** The Israelites ask a really good question in verse 3, but unfortunately they do not wait before God to hear his answer and they immediately jump to a very poor conclusion/answer on their own. They seek to “move” God instead of being led and moved by him. **What are some areas of life where we are tempted to “move” or “manage” God and his power instead of trusting him to lead and move?**

In verse 3, the Israelites are attributing the power to save them and defeat their enemies to the ark, not the Lord. The Israelites were mistaken in thinking that so long as they had the ark they would succeed. The ark became an idol to them. Like we talked about at the start of study, it became their lucky charm. In verse 5, the Israelites shouted as though they had already won the battle once the ark came into the camp. **Is there any outward expression of religion in your life that you’ve become more dependent upon than God Himself?**

There is a pattern throughout the Scriptures and throughout all of history - the human race will choose a small “controllable” representation of God (through idols, superstitions, items regarded as holy, places regarded as holy, and countless other ways) and prefer trusting that representation rather than the loving Father who wants to draw them in and heal them. **Why do you think people (or more specifically, you and me) continue to fall into various versions of this same trap?**

**Read I Samuel 4:6-11**

**How would you compare and contrast the response to the ark of the Israelites with the response of the Philistines?** While the Israelites are cheering because of the arrival of the ark, the ruthless and pagan Philistines begin to show more regard for God than the people of God do. While the Israelites were celebrating the ark as their lucky charm, it is the Philistines who see the ark as a reminder of awe of a God whose power is bigger than they can comprehend. The Philistines seem to have more holy fear than the Israelites.

In Jeremiah 7:12-15 the prophet recounts this lesson learned at Shiloh. Read Jeremiah 7:12-15. This further unpacks what was going on when the Israelites lost the ark. What does the prophet point to as the lessons to be learned from losing the ark from Shiloh?

The capturing of the ark is a display of God’s judgment on Israel. They are now made to see their foolishness in misplacing their trust. However, the same act of judgment is also one of mercy. Through their defeat, God was revealing to the Israelites how to properly rely on Him. **Can you think of a time where it may have seemed as though God was against you, but was creating greater dependence on Him? Can you think of examples in your own experience or that of others where God has acted both in judgment and in grace at the same time?**

**Read I Samuel 4:12-22**

**When you are given bad news, which of these approaches do you prefer?**

* **Just rip the bandaid off quickly and get to the toughest part.**
* **Break it to me gently and let me adjust as you lead into the bad news.**

Let’s look at Eli’s experience and response. **What are the four bad news headlines given to Eli? Which is the one that seems to concern him most?** (*see verse 13 and 18*)

Let’s look at the experience and response of Phineas’ wife. H.L. Ellison comments on Phineas’ wife saying, “The glory has departed from Israel” by saying this: “The glory of God had indeed departed, but not because the ark of God had been captured; the ark had been captured because the glory had already departed.”

She is so distraught that she gives her son a drastic name, Ichabod, meaning “no glory” or “the glory has departed.” The people had turned from God, and God is walking them through a very painful season in preparation to bring them back. When we begin to drift away from God, it is hard for us to notice the step-by-step distance from Him we are choosing. We can suddenly feel out of His presence but that distance has been developing for some time. **If you were to graph out your life indicating movements toward God and away from God, what would that graph look like?**

Wherever you are in your journey with Christ, you can always do well to remember the goodness and the long-haul work of God. Even when things seem at their worst, God always has glimmers of hope and expressions of His love waiting. Whether this thought helps you to endure a tough time or helps you to reframe past disappointments, we know that He is working out of a love that pursues us. **Has this truth ever helped you through a tough time or helped you reframe a past difficulty?**

**Conclusion and Application**

The Israelites rebellion has brought about seasons of no vision, no hearing, and now no glory - it feels like God’s presence has left them. But God is not done yet. He will pursue them with His love and provide deliverers in Samuel and eventually David - one who is hearing from God is captured by God’s glory.

This chapter has a lot of bad news, many tough moments, and seems to end with the weight of judgment and despair. God will do beautiful things here, even out of something that the Israelites feared the most.

**There are bookends of powerful lessons at the start and end of this chapter:**

* **We are not designed to move God where we want him to go. We are designed to be moved by him.**
* **Even when things seem at their worst, God always has glimmers of hope and expressions of His love waiting. God is working out of a love that pursues us.**

**Which of these lessons or others from the passage stand out to you the most?**