

1. He's a Sovereign God

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- [0 : 0 0] And we'll read the whole chapter together. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now, Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines camped at Aphek. And the Philistines drew up a line against Israel. And when the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about 4,000 men on the field of battle. And when the troops 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. 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. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. 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.
- [1 : 1 6] 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. Let you become slaves of the Hebrews as they have been to you. Be men and fight. So the Philistines fought. And Israel was defeated. And they fled every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter. For there fell of Israel 30,000 foot soldiers. And the ark of God was captured. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died. 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.
- [2 : 2 6] When he arrived, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road, watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. 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's this uproar? And the man hurried and came and told Eli. Now Eli was 98 years old. His eyes were so set that he couldn't see. And the man said to Eli, I am he who has come from the battle. I fled from the battle today. And he said, How did it go, my son? 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. 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 backwards from his seat by the side of the gate.

[3 : 27] And his neck was broken and he died. For the man was old and heavy. He had judged Israel 40 years. 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 on her. And about the time of her death, the woman attending her said to her, Do not be afraid, you have born a son.

And she did not answer or pay attention. And she named the child Ichabod, saying, The glory has departed from Israel, because the ark of God has been captured, and because of her father-in-law and her husband.

And she said, The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured. Keep your Bibles open and let's pray as we come to God's word.

Dear Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your promise to be with us as we gather as your people, that as we call upon your name and as we seek your word in this, the word that you have written to us and for us, that you have promised to speak to us.

[4 : 48] And so we pray, Lord, now, as we turn aside from the hustle and bustle of today, as we come in to the peace of this place, from the busyness of the world outside.

We pray that you would unstop our ears and unblock our hearts, that we might hear the word that you have for us today.

For we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, over the next four weeks, we're going to look at this little story in 1 Samuel chapters 4 to 6.

And you might like to read around it and read ahead a little bit for the next few weeks to get you up to speed with what's going on. It's the story of how the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord was lost and then at last how it was brought back to its place among God's people.

Not exactly its proper place at the very heart of the sanctuary, the tabernacle of God, but at least back into the land where it belonged. And as we go on, we'll discover it's a really very exciting story indeed.

[5 : 55] In fact, it leaves Indiana Jones right in the shade. It's far more exciting than that story, The Raiders of the Lost Ark, even though the subject is the same. The difference is this story is actually true.

This is history. It's not make-believe. And not only is it a true story, but it's a story with a message. The book of Samuel is one of the books known as the Former Prophets.

Samuel himself was the first of a long line of prophets who were to lead God's people and to speak for God, to speak prophetic words to God's people. So this story is history, but it is a prophetic word.

As the New Testament says, these things are written, they're recorded for us, for Christians today. So we want to understand its message. But to understand what's going on, we need to get a grip of the background here.

1 Samuel, the book that we're looking at, begins at a time of great upheaval for God's people. It comes straight after the book of Judges, the troublesome days, days really of national anarchy.

[7 : 03] If you just turn back a few pages to the very last verse of the book of Judges, very bottom of the page, 221, you'll see, in those days, the days of the Judges, the days our chapter comes in, in those days, there was no king in Israel.

Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Well, we've got a king. Well, we haven't got a king, have we? We've got a queen. And we've still got her, thank God.

And we've got a government. But nevertheless, that's a pretty good description of our world today, isn't it? Everyone does that which is right in their own eyes. And in these days of the Judges, as well as there being no king to carry God's authority, his lordship among his people, there was something else.

Something else that tends to go along with an anarchic society. Just look at 1 Samuel chapter 3, verse 1, the chapter before the one that we read. Here's another feature of those days.

The word of the Lord was rare in those days. So it's a pretty bleak picture, the setting of this chapter. There's no evidence of God's rule among his people.

[8 : 17] And there's no real evidence of God's word. So these are dark days. But of course, the whole point of the book of Samuel is that in fact God is not absent, even though these signs of his presence are obscured.

No, God is working. He's working quietly, sometimes mysteriously, as he does move sometimes to carry out his will. He's working to restore his word.

That's what the first three chapters of 1 Samuel are all about. You might want to read them in your own Bible later on. It's about God beginning to raise up his prophet Samuel, to speak God's word, to bring back the word of his truth to his people.

And it's a book that tells us all about how God is working out in the background to bring a king for his people, a man after God's own heart who would rule them and exercise God's lordship, ultimately King David.

By the way, that's the point of the little book that's just there between Judges and 1 Samuel. You probably just turned over it, but you'll remember we did a study on that some months ago, the book of Ruth.

[9 : 27] The whole point of that book is the very last verse. It tells us about the genealogy, the lineage of that king, David. So you see, God is at work, even in the darkness.

And his work is just beginning to be seen in these first few chapters of 1 Samuel. Just turn over to the end of 1 Samuel 3, the very last verse.

Very, very encouraging. The Lord, who had apparently been absent in his word, the Lord appeared again at Shiloh. Even in the midst of a corrupt national religious establishment, we are told that God revealed himself to Samuel by the word of the Lord.

So you see, things are beginning to brighten up and as we get to the bottom of that page, that wonderful verse at the end of chapter 3, we're beginning to have great expectations. God is on the move.

He's at work. He's doing something. He's raising up his prophet and he's going to raise up his king. So we turn over the page as we've done to the beginning of chapter 4 and we expect great things, don't we?

[10 : 41] We expect revival on a national scale. Must be just around the corner. So we turn over with great expectation and oh dear, bit of a disaster, isn't it?

what's going on? It's often a question that we find ourselves asking, isn't it? When God seems to be beginning to do something new in our life and our experience, when there's promising signs and then we expect great things to follow and then all of a sudden, bang!

What is God doing? Well, we have to learn that God is working his purpose out but we also need to learn as believing people that God works his purpose out his way.

God will not be pushed around. He won't be pressed into quick fixes in the life of his people. He's not content to do small things. No, our God is a great God.

He's a sovereign God. He's a God who is doing a thorough work among his people. He's a God who is doing something so much bigger, so much greater, so much more far-reaching than even his own people can't begin to imagine it.

[11 : 56] And what's more, he is a holy God. He's an awesome God. He is a God of grace and mercy but his mercy must be a just mercy, a righteous mercy.

God can't take shortcuts. God can't give cheap grace, quick fixes because otherwise we might fail to see him as he really is.

We might underestimate the God of the Bible. And if these chapters that we're going to look at in the next few weeks, if these chapters teach us anything, they teach us this, never, ever, underestimate the God of the Bible.

And first of all, this chapter that we've read reminds us very forcefully that the God of the Bible is a sovereign God. He will not be used even by his own favoured people, his Israel, his household of faith, his church.

This chapter leaves us in absolutely no doubt that we can never think that we can somehow contain or control the God of the Bible.

[13 : 15] So let's just look a little bit at this story and see what God is teaching us about himself. Remember, that is always the purpose of the Bible. God is teaching us about himself.

Not primarily about us, it's about him. So what's going on in this chapter? The people's question in verse 3 seems quite fair, doesn't it? Why on earth has the Lord caused Israel to be defeated before the Philistines?

They knew their theology, these people. They knew that God is sovereign, that he's in charge. They knew that if they were defeated it must be God who had allowed it. But surely, Philistines are meant to be defeated by God.

Remember the story of Judges? Remember Gideon and Samson and all of that? What's going on? So after this first defeat in verse 2 they decide to move God more actively into the picture.

Let's get the Ark of the Covenant, they say. Now that seems to be exactly the right thing to do, doesn't it? That's what Moses used to do. Every time the Israelites went out to battle the Ark went first.

[14 : 22] Numbers 10 and 35 Moses would shout Arise, O God! May your enemies be scattered! And the Ark would go first and the people would come afterwards and the enemies would be routed. Well, is that what happens?

No, there's no scattering at all here, is there? The Philistines, verse 7, were scared enough when they heard about this. I mean, their theology was a little bit suspect.

They didn't really understand about God and gods but they seemed to understand the history, at least had a vague idea. They knew that these Egyptians had been defeated by this Ark in the wilderness by plagues.

Well, of course, the plagues weren't in the wilderness, they were in Egypt. They had a vague idea. It's a bit like today. They kind of remembered some vague lessons in Arian school about something to do with Egyptians and plagues and in a crisis they tried to remember what they understood of God.

So, they were afraid. they thought this must mean God was on the side of the Israelites. So, they had to pull themselves together and fight as hard as they could so that they wouldn't be routed and to their absolute astonishment they routed the Israelites again.

[15 : 36] Verse 10, they slaughtered 30,000 foot soldiers. Absolute carnage. And, verse 11, the Ark of God was captured.

And, if the Philistines were surprised, my goodness, the people of Israel were absolutely shocked, weren't they? What on earth was going on?

Well, friends, what was going on is that God was teaching them something that they had to learn about himself, something that was very hard but necessary.

They had to learn that the God of the Bible is not just some fairy godmother. He is a sovereign god. He's a god who will not be used. He is a god who cannot be contained, who cannot be controlled.

You see, first their mistake was they thought they could contain the Lord of hosts. They thought they could contain him within their religion as though you could possess his kingdom power even when they had no real love for his kingship, for his lordship.

[16 : 45] But you see, real kingdom faith means real relationship with the Lord who is the king. And right relationships can't just be substituted by religion.

It's no good taking the ark of the covenant of the Lord out into battle when all the time you're spitting on the covenant relationship you should have with God as if somehow the ark, the sign of God's presence could contain and constrain the power of God.

That would be just like being the sort of person who celebrates your wedding anniversary all the time, who's always looking at your wedding photos, who cherishes your wedding ring but all the time you're committing adultery.

That can never make a marriage real and lasting, can it? The marriage isn't contained in the ring. The ring is worthless unless it speaks of something that's real, a real relationship.

The first two chapters of this book of 1 Samuel show us just how far the people's hearts were from God. Chapter 2, verse 12 tells us that the chief priests, the religious leaders, the sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas were worthless men, men who didn't even know the Lord.

[18 : 05] And the people no doubt just had the kind of leaders that they deserved. Eli the father, well, he was weak, he was feeble. He made a few protests about his sons but ultimately he didn't do anything.

So what had happened you see in Israel was what so often happens in the life of God's people. The religious trappings become far, far more important than anything else.

They become the thing that really matters. Lots of religion but do as you please. Love the ark of God, polish it up but ignore the Lord whose ark it is.

And so they convinced themselves that as long as they still had the language of faith and the trappings of religion, well then God would be fooled into being on their side and he would have to bless them and favour them.

It's so common that attitude, isn't it? Because of course it's so basic to the human heart. constantly we reverse the way things really are. That God is the Lord and we are made to serve him but we turn it into the opposite, don't we?

[19 : 14] Where I'm number one and God's there to serve me. And we actually, you know, we actually fool ourselves into believing that that's true. That's the mark of all human religion, all religion.

It wants God to be contained in religious trappings, in ceremonies, in rituals, in regulations. So that a God who's contained like that, well he can't threaten us.

He can't interfere in our lives in irritating sorts of ways. He's kept at a distance but of course he can be called up like the genie in Aladdin's lamp when we run into trouble, when we need help.

Isn't that what people do? That's exactly what happened here. God contained neatly in a box. There he is. He's in the Ark of the Covenant. That's all we need to be ignored until a time of crisis.

Let's go and get the Ark. Let's get God on our side. That's just like so many folk today, isn't it? That God's there to be ignored and scorned but in a crisis well we turn to prayer.

[20 : 23] Lord get me out of this and honestly I'll see you right in the future. Isn't that what people say? We love to have God contained.

It's so easy. It's so typical actually of the way that we behave even in the Christian church. We haven't changed very much in 3,000 years God's people.

We do it in so many different ways containing God. In some churches it's the sacraments that become the container for God. In some cases it's quite literally the special holy bread and wine in a box with a light on it and a bell rings and out comes the power.

That's God. That's very common today in the church of Rome. For some it's just exactly the opposite. You find the same thing the same principle in very staunchly Protestant churches.

People are proud of their Protestant theology. As long as we've got that right well God will work for us. It doesn't matter where our hearts are. For some folks it's all sorts of other things.

[21 : 27] It could be special spiritual gifts. It could be all kinds of different things. But friends we are as foolish as the Israelites of Samuel's day if we think that we can contain God by our particular religious trappings.

Even if they are the very best and most biblical ones. Even if they are the ones God gives us. We can't contain God in these things and our hearts be far from him.

You can't share his kingdom power if you don't have any love for his person. And if Israel couldn't contain and use God even within the religious trappings that God himself had given.

I mean the Ark of the Covenant was God's idea let's face it. And we are mad absolutely mad if we think that we can possess his power and claim that he's on our side.

just because we make a fuss of our particular religious traditions or trappings whatever they are even if they are in themselves good things. At their very best these things are only there to point us to God.

[22 : 31] These are things to lead us in the knowledge of God himself not to substitute for him not to possess God as though we could contain him. Be warned this story tells us very very plainly God cannot be mocked like that.

He can't be contained. Even the very covenant signs that he gives us as his people even these things are worthless when he himself is being ignored and disobeyed.

You can't replace being taken up with the Lord himself by just being taken up with the things of God. God will not be contained. It's possible to pay lip service to all of these things and yet at heart to actually be ignoring God completely.

You know that. So do I. That's why some people who seem to be terribly devoted to the church all their lives when a crisis comes well it can all collapse.

The truth is that their faith and their trust has never really been in the Lord himself. Been in these things. Been in things that they thought could contain God.

[23 : 41] It could be used by them. But no. See the real reason that we try to contain God in a manageable religion is so that we can control him.

And the Israelites wanted to control the Lord of hosts. They wanted to control him by containing him in their religion. They thought they could presume upon his promises even when there was no obedience, no submission whatsoever to his kingdom commands.

But they were wrong. That's why human beings love religion. That's why we love trying to contain God within the practices and rituals and ceremonies, the do's and don'ts of a religious subculture.

It lets us forget that the God of the kingdom actually makes demands on our lives. See the answer to their question in verse 3, why is this happening?

Well that was plain in their Bibles. The gospel you see, God's covenant is a call of his grace, but it's a calling that makes demands on God's people.

[24 : 47] We're to love him and we're to show our love by his obedience. That's what Jesus says, if you love me you'll keep my commandments. That's what shows you love me. And the Bible had told God's people again and again that if they were repeatedly disobedient, God would chastise them.

Just because God is a loving father, he disciplines his children. Discipline is a mark of love. That's why the indiscipline and recklessness in our society just reflects the lack of love in so many loveless relationships.

The two go together. In Leviticus chapter 26 and Deuteronomy chapter 32, God had repeatedly said, if you continue to disobey, God will cause you to fall at the hand of your enemies.

There's no use just doing more and better sacrifices, God. The prophets were always saying it's not sacrifices God wants, it's a humble, penitent heart. It's the man who trembles at my word and obeys me that I esteem, says God.

It's not the one who prides himself in his sound theology or his superior spirituality. It's not the clergyman with his fancy robes or his clever prayers. It's not the church that has the smartest buildings or the best reputation.

[26 : 02] No. It's those who obey my word. God. It's a real warning, isn't it? You see, we can have all the trappings, we can have all the very best evangelical credentials, but God will not bless a people whose hearts are disobedient to his kingdom rule, who forget that he is a sovereign God, a Lord, who begin to think that they can command and control God instead of the very opposite, that it ought to be us who are seeking him and us who are submitting to him.

And that's the lesson that Israel had to learn. You can't control God like that. God has said it clearly. If you don't listen, I will set your enemies against you. And they had to see, you see, that possession of the Ark of the Covenant and possession of the Gospel revelation that was within it on the tablets of stone, the words of the covenant, that possession is not a guarantee of God's presence and blessing.

It's not possessing the Gospel that saves you, it's what you do with the Gospel, it's obeying the Gospel, it's submitting to the Lordship of Christ. Jesus said, it's not Lord, Lord that gets you into the kingdom, it's doing the will of my Father, recognizing that God is a sovereign God.

possessing the Ark didn't guarantee God's blessing, but the withdrawal of the Ark certainly did speak of the absence of God's blessing.

At least God was still present, but he was present not in blessing, but in judgment. And you see, when you think you can control God so that he'll bring blessing no matter what you think of him, no matter how you disregard his sovereignty, you will discover a horrifying truth.

[27 : 57] that not only can you not have his blessing that way, but indeed you must instead face the other side of his covenant, you must face his judgment and wrath.

And that's what Israel experienced here. Eli saw it, verse 18, he understood, that's what killed him, the old man was keeling over and broke his neck when he heard about the Ark.

It's a pathetic end, but only at his end did he get things in proper perspective. In chapter 2, God had said to him, why do you regard your sons as more important than me? But now at last here, it was the horror of seeing God's glory departing that finished Eli off.

That totally eclipsed even the loss of his own family. Terribly tragic, you know, when it's only through these sorts of judgments at the hand of God that somebody at last begins to see things in proper perspective.

But the truth is, God often has to chase us that way, so we do see. And it's a real warning to us, isn't it? We're still the same people of the same God, and it's still possible to forget that we are a people who serve a living God, a sovereign God.

[29 : 19] It's still possible to think that we can contain and control this God. And therefore, it's still possible to grieve him away from us.

So that he does depart. That's why Paul writes to the Ephesians in Ephesians chapter 4, don't grieve the Spirit of God. Don't do it.

Don't underestimate the God of the Bible. He will not be used even by his own people. He won't be contained like the genie of Aladdin's lamp. He won't be controlled like a whipping boy who's there to serve you.

He will not. He won't share his glory with another. Rather than that, look at verse 22. His glory will depart.

Aikobod. No glory. So you see, friends, this is a gracious warning from God. It's a warning to Christian people. Don't presume upon God.

[30 : 20] Be careful. Do not relegate the sovereign God in your life so that he comes behind like Eli, your sons, your family, your friends, your career.

Don't do it. He is a sovereign God. So warning to Christian churches, don't presume that just keeping up the outward show will fool God.

God, he sees and he knows. And there comes a time when he says, enough is enough. Aikobod. My glory is departing. You don't need to go far to look through Glasgow, to look through Scotland today, to see empty churches, churches that once were full of people praising God, now antique shops, night clubs, or just heaps of rubble.

Living memorials to people who presumed upon God until his glory departed. So friends, a tough word, but a gracious word.

The God of the Bible is a sovereign God. He will not be used. Don't think you can ever contain him or control him. Never underestimate the God of the Bible.

[31 : 40] Let's pray. Sovereign God, we bear before you and confess that so often we seek to make you serve us. Forgive us, O God, for our presumption, for our pride.

Help us, we pray, to see that you are God in heaven above and that we are but dust in your sight. Yet in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Teach us to humble our hearts, we pray, before it's too late. That we might know again your gracious and your loving presence and heed your word and discover the joy of what it truly means to be your servants.

So help us, we pray, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.