The Ark is Lost

1 Samuel 4:12-22
SS Lesson for 11/08/2026

Devotional Scripture: Ps 78:56-61

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary
Key Verses: 1 Sam 4:22

MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

DEATH OF ELI (1 SAM 4:12-18)
News of the war (12-15)
War to teach the fear of God (Zeph 3:6-7)
War where God pours out His indignation (Zeph 3:8)
War designed to turn nations back to God (Jer 18:6-10)
War that express the anger of God (Judg 2:14)
War that prove that God has total control (Isa 45:7)
Israel defeated and Ark taken (16-17)
Defeat because of not considering God's ways (Job 34:25-27)
Defeat that God purposed (Isa 23:9)
Defeat that is total and exhaustive (Ezek 29:14-16)
Defeat that displays the power of God (Luke 1:51-52)
Defeat because of pride (Jer 49:14-16)
Defeat regardless of human might and power (Ezek 32:29)
Eli's death (18)
Death based on God's timing (1 Sam 2:31)
Death that God had proclaimed (1 Sam 3:11-12)
Death through judgment that starts in the family of God (1 Peter 4:17-18)
GLORY DEPARTED FROM ISRAEL (1 SAM 4:19-22)
Despair and birth (19-20)
Despair but troubles are temporary and eternal glory will be much better (2 Cor 4:17)
Despair but know that godly discipline produces righteousness (Heb 12:10-11)
Despair but one should persevere (James 1:2-4)
Birth can be both full of pain and joy (John 16:21-22)
Glory departed (21-22)
Glory departed because people exchanged it for idols (Jer 2:11)
Glory departed because God sent it to the enemy (Ps 78:61)
Glory departed because the Philistines captured the Ark (1 Sam 5:1-3)
Glory departed by angels took the Ark out of the temple (Ezek 10:18-19)

CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM BOB DEFFINBAUGH
The Defeat of Israel, and the Death of Eli's Sons (4:1-11)
The Death of Eli and His Daughter-in-Law (4:12-22)
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE NIV STANDARD LESSON COMMENTARY

Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Today's lesson takes us to about the year 1067 BC. It was a year of transition for the tribes of Israel: one judge's rule ended (Eli), a new judge emerged (Samuel), and the community lost the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines in battle. The Israelites had built the ark from plans God gave Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 25:10-22). Thus, the ark had been a distinctive part of Israelite identity for some 380 years. Across those centuries, the ark had traveled with the Israelites as they moved through the wilderness; it had rested in the tabernacle as they settled in a location. It served as a substantial visual aid as the people crossed the Jordan River (Joshua 3; Lesson 2) and followed God's instructions in the fall of Jericho (6:2-13). Joshua set up the tabernacle with the ark at Shiloh after he assigned the tribes their allotments of land (Joshua 18:1). The city was centrally located and reasonably accessible to all twelve tribes. It was nestled in the hills of Ephraim, approximately halfway between Bethel and Shechem (Judges 21:19). The ark resided in Shiloh for most of the 380 years noted above. During the latter part of the period of the judges, the Philistines became a major opponent of Israel, beginning about 1080 BC. As today's lesson opens, the Israelites battle against the Philistines once again. The Philistine army defeated the Israelites at the two-day Battle of Aphek, where the Israelites lost about four thousand men on the first day (1 Samuel 4:1-11). Reflecting on the day's losses, Israel's leaders looked for an explanation. They concluded that the Lord wasn't with them because the Ark of the Covenant hadn't been present with the soldiers during the battle's first day (1 Samuel 4:3). Therefore, the Israelites sent men to Shiloh to requisition the ark. The round-trip distance between Ebenezer (the camp of the Israelite army) and Shiloh was about forty miles. A walking pace of 3 miles per hour would require over thirteen hours for a trip to Shiloh and back. Therefore, the two days of battle referred to in 1 Samuel 4 may not have been two consecutive days (compare 17:16). The fact that the ark was present for the second day of battle reveals the Israelites' determination to make this plan happen. Hophni and Phinehas, the wicked sons of Eli the high priest (1 Samuel 2:12-15), accompanied the ark to the Israelite camp (4:4). The presence of the ark intimidated the Philistines (4:5-8). But it also inspired them to fight with fervor (4:9). On the disastrous second day of the Battle of Aphek, Israel lost an additional 30,000 soldiers, the Ark of the Covenant was captured, and Eli's two sons died (4:10-11).

Key Verses: 1 Sam 4:22

And she said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the Ark of God has been captured."

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Death of Eli (1 Sam 4:12-18)

12 Then a man of Benjamin ran from the battle line the same day, and came to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dirt on his head.
13 Now when he came, there was Eli, sitting on a seat by the wayside watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told it, all the city cried out.
14 When Eli heard the noise of the outcry, he said, "What does the sound of this tumult mean?" And the man came quickly and told Eli.
15 Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes were so dim that he could not see.
16 Then the man said to Eli, "I am he who came from the battle. And I fled today from the battle line." And he said, "What happened, my son?"
17 So the messenger answered and said, "Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has been a great slaughter among the people. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead; and the Ark of God has been captured."
18 Then it happened, when he made mention of the Ark of God, that Eli fell off the seat backward by the side of the gate; and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years.

News of the war (12-15)

War to teach the fear of God (Zeph 3:6-7)

6 "I have cut off nations; their strongholds are demolished. I have left their streets deserted, with no one passing through. Their cities are destroyed; no one will be left — no one at all. 7 I said to the city, 'Surely you will fear me and accept correction!' Then her dwelling would not be cut off, nor all my punishments come upon her. But they were still eager to act corruptly in all they did.

War where God pours out His indignation (Zeph 3:8)

8 Therefore wait for me," declares the Lord, "for the day I will stand up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them — all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger.

War designed to turn nations back to God (Jer 18:6-10)

6 "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. 7 If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, 8 and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. 9 And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, 10 and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

War that express the anger of God (Judg 2:14)

14 In his anger against Israel the Lord handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist.

War that prove that God has total control (Isa 45:7)

7 I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things.

Israel defeated and Ark taken (16-17)

Defeat because of not considering God's ways (Job 34:25-27)

25 Because he takes note of their deeds, he overthrows them in the night and they are crushed. 26 He punishes them for their wickedness where everyone can see them, 27 because they turned from following him and had no regard for any of his ways.

Defeat that God purposed (Isa 23:9)

9 The Lord Almighty planned it, to bring low the pride of all glory and to humble all who are renowned on the earth.

Defeat that is total and exhaustive (Ezek 29:14-16)

14 I will bring them back from captivity and return them to Upper Egypt, the land of their ancestry. There they will be a lowly kingdom. 15 It will be the lowliest of kingdoms and will never again exalt itself above the other nations. I will make it so weak that it will never again rule over the nations. 16 Egypt will no longer be a source of confidence for the people of Israel but will be a reminder of their sin in turning to her for help. Then they will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.'"

Defeat that displays the power of God (Luke 1:51-52)

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. 52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

Defeat because of pride (Jer 49:14-16)

14 I have heard a message from the Lord: An envoy was sent to the nations to say, "Assemble yourselves to attack it! Rise up for battle!" 15 "Now I will make you small among the nations, despised among men. 16 The terror you inspire and the pride of your heart have deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks, who occupy the heights of the hill. Though you build your nest as high as the eagle's, from there I will bring you down," declares the Lord.

Defeat regardless of human might and power (Ezek 32:29)

> 29 "Edom is there, her kings and all her princes; despite their power, they are laid with those killed by the sword. They lie with the uncircumcised, with those who go down to the pit.

Eli's death (18)

Death based on God's timing (1 Sam 2:31)

> 31 The time is coming when I will cut short your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your family line

Death that God had proclaimed (1 Sam 3:11-12)

> 11 And the Lord said to Samuel: "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle. 12 At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family, from beginning to end.

Death through judgment that starts in the family of God (1 Peter 4:17-18)

> 17 For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

Glory Departed from Israel (1 Sam 4:19-22)

19 Now his daughter-in-law, Phinehas' wife, was with child, due to be delivered; 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 herself and gave birth, for her labor pains came upon her.
20 And about the time of her death the women who stood by her said to her, "Do not fear, for you have borne a son." But she did not answer, nor did she regard it.
21 Then she named the child Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel!" because the Ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband.
22 And she said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the Ark of God has been captured."

Despair and birth (19-20)

Despair but troubles are temporary and eternal glory will be much better (2 Cor 4:17)

> 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

Despair but know that godly discipline produces righteousness (Heb 12:10-11)

> 10 Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. 11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Despair but one should persevere (James 1:2-4)

> 2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. 4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Birth can be both full of pain and joy (John 16:21-22)

> 21 A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. 22 So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.

Glory departed (21-22)

Glory departed because people exchanged it for idols (Jer 2:11)

> 11 Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols.

Glory departed because God sent it to the enemy (Ps 78:61)

> 61 He sent [the ark of] His might into captivity, His splendor into the hands of the enemy.

Glory departed because the Philistines captured the Ark (1 Sam 5:1-3)

> 1 After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. 2 Then they carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon. 3 When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! They took Dagon and put him back in his place.

Glory departed by angels took the Ark out of the temple (Ezek 10:18-19)

> 18 Then the glory of the Lord departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim. 19 While I watched, the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground, and as they went, the wheels went with them. They stopped at the entrance to the east gate of the Lord's house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

The Defeat of Israel, and the Death of Eli's Sons (4:1-11)

The Israelites have been dominated by the Philistines for some time so that the Philistines look upon them as their slaves (4:9). For some reason, battle breaks out between the Philistines and the Israelites, and the Israelites are badly beaten. When the dust settles, it is learned that 4,000 Israelites have died (verse 2). When the Israelites return to camp, they cannot understand how God would allow them to suffer this defeat.

Without fasting and prayer, without consulting God, the Israelites decide to practice what Dale Ralph Davis calls "Rabbit-Foot Theology."[16] The Ark is not viewed as a symbol of God's presence, but as a magic lamp, which they but need to rub rightly to summon God to their aid. The Ark is a good luck charm, so that wherever they take it, they will be blessed. "Of course," they reason, "we didn't take the Ark along with us! We'll take the Ark when we go to battle tomorrow, and we're certain to win. God is sure to be with us because His Ark is with us."

The plan backfires miserably. At first, it does not appear so, but in retrospect it is a huge disaster from the perspective of those who thought the Ark would assure them victory. When the Ark is brought out of the tent and into its place before the Israelite soldiers, a great shout resounds from the Israelite camp. It becomes like a huge pep rally before a football game. The Israelite warriors are really pumped. They cannot lose. God is going to be with them.

The Philistine soldiers hear the uproar coming from the Israelite camp and wonder what could cause such a triumphant shout from the Israelite camp. Then they learn that the Ark has been brought out into the camp of the Israelites. They, like the Israelites, look upon the Ark as though it is capable of magic. They recall that when God led the Israelites against the Egyptians, they were defeated. They remember the stories of the victories God gave the Israelites over their enemies, and that whenever the Israelites fought their enemies, they took the Ark with them. They now fear that the presence of the Ark before the Israelite armies assures Israel of a victory. They might die, the Philistines conclude, but at least they can die like men. And so, rather than give up, the Philistines become motivated to fight to the death, and to die like heroes. This results in the Philistines being even more motivated to fight than the Israelites, and the Philistines once again defeat the Israelites -- only this time 30,000 Israelites are slain. Among the dead are Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, who are slain as the Ark of God is captured as a trophy of war.

The Israelites foolishly conclude that taking the Ark of God to war is their guarantee of success in battle. In the plan of God, the Israelites taking the Ark into battle is the means God ordained of fulfilling the words of

prophecy He had spoken through the unnamed prophet. Hophni and Phinehas accompany the Ark to war, and when the Israelites suffer defeat and the Ark is taken, the two sons of Eli die on the same day (see 2:34).

The Death of Eli and His Daughter-in-Law (4:12-22)

The Word of the LORD is fulfilled, in part, but there is more divine judgment to come on this day of infamy. Eli is stationed by the road in his seat, trembling in heart as he eagerly waits for news of the battle. He must sense that this is the Day of Judgment. The Ark of God is gone from Shiloh, as are his two sons, and Eli is not at all comfortable. A certain Benjamite escapes death and flees back to Shiloh from the battle scene with his clothes torn and dust on his head. It is a sign of mourning and defeat, which Eli is not able to see because his vision is all but gone. The rest of the city begins to cry out as word of their defeat quickly circulates.

Eli can hear even if he cannot see, and what he hears frightens him. His ears, as it were, are about to tingle (see 3:11). Eli asks what the commotion means, and the man who has escaped hastens to his side where he briefly sums up his report. There is no "good news" and "bad news" but only "bad news" -- Israel has been defeated by the Philistines, Eli's sons have been killed, and the Ark of God has been taken. The news is more than Eli's 98-year-old body can handle. He collapses, falling from his seat in such a way that he breaks his neck. Eli is dead, along with his sons, and all on the same day. His forty years of service as judge over Israel has ended.

The dying is not yet over for the house of Eli. The wife of Eli's son, Phinehas, is pregnant, and the news of Israel's tragic defeat, the loss of the Ark, and the deaths of Eli and her husband bring on her labor. As she is in labor, things do not go well. While those helping try to comfort her, she refuses their help. When she learns that her child is a boy, she names him Ichabod, a name meaning "no glory," because the Ark of God has been taken and her husband and father-in-law have died. This daughter-in-law of Eli seems more perceptive than her husband. She realizes that the greatest disaster is the loss of the Ark. In her mind, the capture of the Ark is the departure of God's glory.

Actually, I think she was wrong. As I understand the Old Testament, the glory had long since departed from the tabernacle. Consider these words in Exodus, which describe the coming of God's glory to the tabernacle:

34 Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. 35 And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. 36 And throughout all their journeys whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the sons of Israel would set out; 37 but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day when it was taken up. 38 For throughout all their journeys, the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and there was fire in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel (Exodus 40:34-38).

God promised He would meet with the Levitical priests there at the entrance of the tabernacle:

42 "It shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the doorway of the tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there. 43 "And I will meet there with the sons of Israel, and it shall be consecrated by My glory. 44 "And I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar; I will also consecrate Aaron and his sons to minister as priests to Me. 45 "And I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God. 46 "And they shall know that I am the LORD their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them; I am the LORD their God" (Exodus 29:42-46).

Somewhere along the line, the glory of God departs from the tabernacle. This departure appears not to be as dramatic and apparent as the coming of God's glory to the tabernacle, as described above. Samuel lives in the tabernacle. He sleeps but a few feet away from the Ark of God (3:3), yet he has not yet come to know God and seems to have no special sense of the presence of God there. God's appearance to Samuel in the tabernacle is described as something special, something unusual. God comes there and stands, calling Samuel (3:10) in a way that is not at all typical. Samuel does not recognize that it is the LORD; he has to be told who it is by Eli. Even Eli is not quick to discern the LORD's appearance.

The Ark is not the manifestation of God to Israel there in the tabernacle. It is no idol. It is a symbol of God's presence with His people. While the symbol remains in the possession of the priests there in Shiloh, the glory of God has long since departed. The capture of the Ark only symbolizes what is already true, what has been true for a long time. It is certain that the glory has departed from Shiloh, but God's glory will never be hidden by sinful men, as our next lesson in this series will show.

(Adapted from URL:https://bible.org/seriespage/4-rise-samuel-and-fall-eli-and-sons-1-samuel-31-422)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

The chain of events in today's lesson is traceable to a good question and a wrong answer in 1 Samuel 4:3. The good question, posed after the defeat on the first day of battle, is "Why did the LORD bring defeat on us today before the Philistines?" The wrong answer comes next: "Let us bring the Ark so that he may go with us and save us." Sadly, this would not be the last time the Israelites used a physical object as a good luck charm (Jeremiah 7:4; Ezekiel 13:18, 20; etc.). The tragedies that befell the Israelites in general, and Eli's household in particular, should have been received as a message: God will not be used or manipulated. What changes in your life need to be made to reflect this fact?