The Ark Is Lost

Devotional Reading: Psalm 29
Background Scripture: 1 Samuel 4:2–7:2

1 Samuel 4:12–22

12 That same day a Benjamite ran from the
battle line and went to Shiloh with his clothes
torn and dust on his head. 13 When he arrived,
there was Eli sitting on his chair by the side
of the road, watching, because his heart feared
for the ark of God. When the man entered the
town and told what had happened, the whole
town sent up a cry.

14 Eli heard the outcry and asked, "What is
the meaning of this uproar?"

The man hurried over to Eli, 15 who was
ninety-eight years old and whose eyes had
failed so that he could not see. 16 He told Eli, "I
have just come from the battle line; I fled from
it this very day."

Eli asked, "What happened, my son?"

17 The man who brought the news replied,
"Israel fled before the Philistines, and the army
has suffered heavy losses. Also your two sons,
Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of
God has been captured."

18 When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli
fell backward off his chair by the side of the
gate. His neck was broken and he died, for he
was an old man, and he was heavy. He had led l
Israel forty years.

19 His daughter-in-law, the wife of Phine-
has, was pregnant and near the time of deliv-
ery. When she heard the news that the ark of
God had been captured and that her father-in-
law and her husband were dead, she went into
labor and gave birth, but was overcome by her
labor pains. 20 As she was dying, the women
attending her said, "Don't despair; you have
given birth to a son." But she did not respond
or pay any attention.

21 She named the boy Ichabod, saying, "The
Glory has departed from Israel"—because of
the capture of the ark of God and the deaths of
her father-in-law and her husband. 22 She said,
"The Glory has departed from Israel, for the
ark of God has been captured."

Key Text

[Phinehas' wife] said, "The Glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."
—1 Samuel 4:22

Generations:

From Canaan to Jerusalem

Unit 3: From Judges to Kings

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Describe the circumstances that led to the loss of the ark of the covenant.
2. Examine what led to failure and dishonor for the Israelites.
3. Compose a personal lament for times when seeking personal success and glory has led to harm.

Lesson Outline

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- A. Good Luck Charm
- B. Lesson Context

I. Death of a Father (1 Samuel 4:12–18)
- A. Benjamite Messenger (vv. 12–13)
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- C. Israel's Losses (v. 17)
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II. Death of a Wife (1 Samuel 4:19–22)
- A. Woman Near Death (v. 19)
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- B. Despair Over Capture (v. 20)
- C. Departure of Glory (vv. 21–22)
  What's in a Name?

Conclusion
- A. Good Question, Wrong Answer
- B. Prayer
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Introduction

A. Good Luck Charm

During times of war, soldiers have been known to carry good luck charms. These talismans remind them of home, family, love, and normality. Some may believe they bring good fortune or protection. But in general, the objects remind soldiers who they are, where they are from, and that life continues away from the conflict.

Throughout World War I, soldiers from Ireland wore tiny pig charms carved from bog oak. British and Japanese soldiers carried Chinese soapstone monkeys. A US soldier in Iraq reported packing a little teddy bear his wife had given him, scorched by explosions but still intact. Historically, soldiers, sailors, and airmen from various cultures carried rabbits' feet for good luck. Some men brought family mementos: prayer books or dog tags belonging to relatives who returned safely from previous conflicts. One man had a receipt from a burrito-eating contest he won back home!

For the ancient Israelites, the ark of the covenant was to be a reminder of God's faithfulness and power. It was designed by God as a visual aid to help them remember that God dwelt with them. But in Israelite practice, it fell far short of that ideal.

B. Lesson Context

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; Lesson 4).

Joshua set up the tabernacle with the ark at Shi-

loh 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).

I. Death of a Father

(1 Samuel 4:12–18)

A. Benjamite Messenger (vv. 12–13)

12. That same day a Benjamite ran from the battle line and went to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dust on his head.

Israel's battle with the Philistines occurred about twenty miles from *Shiloh* (see Lesson Context). One soldier leaves the battlefield and runs to Shiloh as a messenger. Experienced marathon runners today run at 9 or 10 miles per hour. If this *Benjamite* runner is in this category, the trip takes at least two hours. But that pace is unlikely. More realistic is half that fast, a very brisk walk at 4.5 miles per hour—a four-hour trip before dark to complete the journey *the same day* the battle occurred. He brings news of the terrible defeat.

The fact that the soldier wears torn clothes and has dirt on *his head* signals bad news. People in the ancient Near East expressed grief and mourning in various ways, and we see one of those here. The same two words translated *torn* and *dust* (as in "soil") are also found together in 2 Samuel 1:2 and 15:32. Other methods of mourning include fasting, wailing, donning sackcloth, and placing ashes on one's head (examples: Genesis 37:34; 2 Samuel 13:19; Esther 4:1–3). Those who see the man approach know instantly that his news is not good.

The man is a member of the tribe of Benjamin. The Benjamites are descendants of the youngest of Jacob's twelve sons (Genesis 35:18). The tribe becomes well-known for training warriors with innovative battle skills, including archery, slinging rocks, and ambidextrous fighting (Judges 3:15–16; 20:15–16; 1 Chronicles 12:1–2; see Lesson 7).

What Do You Think?

What modern signals do we use to indicate bad news?

Digging Deeper

Do apparent, physical signs help or hinder messages of woe, warning, and grief?

13a. When he arrived, there was Eli sitting on his chair by the side of the road, watching, because his heart feared for the ark of God.

Living in a time before televised news and instant internet reports, those at the tabernacle and Shiloh wait anxiously for a messenger to bring an account. *Eli*, in dual roles as high priest and judge, is specifically named as one of

those watchers. His deep concern is evident in his posture, seated *on his chair by the side of the road.*

Eli's active presence beside the road goes hand in hand with the agitation of *his heart.* He is uneasy about the vulnerable position in which he and the Israelite elders have placed *the ark of God.* The ark goes by various names in the Old Testament; "ark of God" appears more than thirty times, as does "ark of the Lord." The designation "ark of the covenant" is even more numerous.

Ironically, Eli's active watching contrasts starkly with his previous inattention to God's warning. Although Eli serves as high priest and judge, he fails to control the actions of Hophni and Phinehas, his two sons. See more about them in the commentary on 1 Samuel 4:17, below.

What Do You Think?

Do televised news and instant internet reports help or hinder our reception of news?

Digging Deeper

How do you watch and wait for information that matters deeply to you? What things calm your anxiety? What increases it?

13b. When the man entered the town and told what had happened, the whole town sent up a cry.

For some reason, *the man* does not first inform Eli of the situation upon arriving in *the town* of Shiloh. In later incidents, bad news borne to leaders gets the messengers killed (examples: 2 Samuel 1:1–16; 4:5–12). However, the facts are somewhat different in this case.

B. Battlefield News (vv. 14–16)

14–15. Eli heard the outcry and asked, "What is the meaning of this uproar?" The man hurried over to Eli, who was ninety-eight years old and whose eyes had failed so that he could not see.

Although *Eli* is nearly blind, there seems to be nothing wrong with his hearing. In that regard, he is alerted by the anguished cries of the people as they perceive bad news. Their vocalizations express their grief. We don't know if the messenger has said anything up to this point. Perhaps the noise of *the outcry* indicates the crowd's discernment of the news, based on the man's appearance (torn clothes, etc.) and demeanor. Eli misses these visual cues.

Eli's request for an explanation of *the uproar* is authoritative. Consequently, there is no delay on the messenger's part in laying out the details of the battlefield loss for him. The messenger recounts the particulars next.

16a. He told Eli, "I have just come from the battle line; I fled from it this very day."

To flee from one's army during battle is to open oneself to a charge of cowardice or treasonous desertion (compare 2 Kings 25:11; Jeremiah 37:12–15). We may wonder whether the army had predesignated this soldier as the bearer of battle news, good or bad. If so, then he's not open to the two potential accusations. The text doesn't say either way.

Rather than go directly to his home in the tribal territory of Benjamin, the man goes instead to Shiloh, a town within the boundaries of Ephraim. The messenger explains that he did not merely leave the battle; he *fled*, running for his life. But this is not the kind of information *Eli* seeks.

16b. Eli asked, "What happened, my son?"

Eli is interested in the message, not the messenger! So he asks a second time for more information. His question is the equivalent of, "How did it go?" Eli wants the truth, even if it is what he fears.

Eli appeals to the soldier as *my son*, a term used to stress interconnection. A figurative use of the designation "my son" is also found in 1 Samuel 3:6, 16, and elsewhere. Eli wants to know the complete details, no sugarcoating or leaving things out. We might imagine his unspoken questions bubbling just below the surface: *How bad was the defeat? What has happened to my sons? What about the ark?*

C. Israel's Losses (v. 17)

17. The man who brought the news replied, "Israel fled before the Philistines, and the army has suffered heavy losses. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured."

The soldier gives the essential details, each revelation being progressively worse. We may imagine the strain this messenger feels as he relays the news. Not only must Eli's heart break for the numerous lives lost in *Israel,* but his sons are among the dead.

Hophni and *Phineas*, two selfish priests (1 Samuel 2:12–17), were present at this battle because the Israelite army insisted on taking *the ark* (4:4; see Lesson Context). In association with their position, Hophni and Phineas accompanied the ark to the battlefield. Perhaps they were among those who carried it.

Scripture refers to those two men as "scoundrels" with no regard for the Lord (1 Samuel 2:12). They are distinctly portrayed as men who personify wickedness. God warned Eli twice that devastation would hit his house (2:34; 3:13–14). Perhaps recalling God's sign that "in one day they shall die both of them" influences the trembling of Eli's heart.

The last bit of news is the worst news of all—the Philistines have captured *the ark of God.* It is not coming home. The tabernacle's Most Holy Place will remain empty.

In the ancient Near East, capturing images of enemies' gods was considered a demonstration of the superiority of the victorious army, people group, and their gods. Though the ark was not an image of Israel's God, nor his dwelling place, it did symbolize God's presence and provision. God dwelt "between the cherubim" (1 Samuel 4:4). To the Philistines, the capture of the ark meant that Israel's God had lost—perhaps he was not the fearful almighty the Philistines first presumed (4:7–8). For Israel, the loss must raise the questions, "Has God's presence left us? Is the covenant null and void?"

Eli lost both his physical and spiritual heritage that day. As father and high priest, the people and structures he was called to lead, guide, nurture, and protect met tragic ends.

D. Eli's End (v. 18)

18. When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backward off his chair by the side of the gate. His neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man, and he was heavy. He had led Israel forty years.

The text now reveals where *Eli* was positioned physically: he's right at the entrance to the city, beside the city *gate.* The news he receives there is so devastating that it shakes him to the core. Thus, he loses his balance and falls from his stool. Intense grief sometimes triggers physiological responses like this as the body reacts to external stimuli. With a sudden change in heart rate and blood pressure, Eli may have experienced medical fainting, a seizure, or a stroke. His age and his *heavy* weight combine with the fall to bring about his demise.

The statement that Eli *had led Israel* formally connects his leadership to the sequence of leaders depicted throughout the book of Judges. The designation of *forty years* represents his influence over a generation (compare Numbers 32:13; Psalm 95:10). Samuel officially takes the position of judge and priest in future chapters (1 Samuel 7:3–17).

What Do You Think?

If someone recorded one summative sentence about your life at your death, what would it be?

Digging Deeper

What is your influence over the next generation?

II. Death of a Wife

(1 Samuel 4:19–22)

A. Woman Near Death (v. 19)

19. His daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant and near the time of delivery. When she heard the news that the ark of God had been captured and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she went into labor and gave birth, but was overcome by her labor pains.

The devastation continues. The bitter news reaches *the wife of Phinehas,* and her body responds to the trauma by going into *labor.* She faces the struggle of childbirth while actively grieving a threefold loss.



Visual for Lesson 10. *Point to the visual and ask, "Do you have grief, broken places, or complaints you need to take to God today?"*

Domino Effect

I remember setting up long lines of dominoes on my grandparents' kitchen floor. My brothers and cousins would help by contributing their time and energy. We ensured the youngest relations stayed far from our efforts because they were sure to set off a reaction prematurely!

When every game piece was in place—perfectly equidistant from one another—and everyone was paying attention, Grandpa would announce: "On your mark. Get set. Go!" The chosen participant would tap the first tile, and we'd watch in awe as a wave of seemingly perpetual motion toppled piece after piece.

Similarly, our actions can affect those around us like a chain reaction. When the Israelite elders chose to take the ark from Shiloh to the battlefield, they began a series of events that resulted in negative consequences all around. Will the consequences of your contemplated actions result in blessings or curses? —BRT

B. Despair Over Capture (v. 20)

20. As she was dying, the women attending her said, "Don't despair; you have given birth to a son." But she did not respond or pay any attention.

Childbirth is a stress and strain, even with modern medical technology. In ancient times it was downright dangerous. Maternal and infant deaths were dreadfully common for our premodern ancestors.

As Phinehas's wife's life slips away, some interesting connections may be noted. Rachel died while giving birth hundreds of years earlier, but her child lived, being (re)named Benjamin (Genesis 35:18). Now, as the wife of Phinehas dies, her child lives, and her death is prompted by news brought by a descendant of Benjamin!

Usually, the birth of a boy would be greeted with joy, even if the mother's well-being tempered the good news. However, Phinehas's wife is inconsolable and refuses to respond to the midwives' encouragement.

C. Departure of Glory (vv. 21–22)

21. She named the boy Ichabod, saying, "The Glory has departed from Israel"—because of the capture of the ark of God and the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband.

This newborn is Phinehas's second male child, the other being Ahitub (1 Samuel 14:3). They are the last of Eli's priestly line (compare 2:30–33).

Fathers typically named newborn children in ancient Israel. But this child is now fatherless, so the duty falls to the dying mother. Names often carry meaning, and in her dying anguish, Phinehas's wife names their son *Ichabod*, which literally means, "Where is the glory?" That brings up another interesting parallel with Rachel. As she was dying, she also gave her newborn son a negative name, but in that case, her husband changed it (Genesis 35:18).

In the Old Testament, God's *glory* often refers

How to Say It

Afizere	Ah-fee-zer-*eh*
Aphek	*A*-fek
Belial	*Bee*-li-ul
Bethel	*Beth*-ul
Ephraim	*Ee*-fray-im
Hophni	*Hoff*-nye
Ichabod	*Ik*-uh-bod
Philistines	Fuh-*liss*-teenz or *Fill*-us-teenz
Phinehas	*Fin*-ee-us

to the manifestation of his presence and power (Exodus 14:17–18; 40:34–35; 1 Kings 8:10–11; etc.). Phinehas's wife translates the battlefield loss as quite the opposite.

What's in a Name?

The cultural practice of the Afizere tribe in Nigeria is to name children after unimportant or negative things. They do this to protect their children from evil spirits. The belief is that the spirits will hear the names and, therefore, undervalue the children, thus leaving them alone. For example, the name "Abus," which means "trash," is common amongst the tribe.

Ichabod was named on his mother's deathbed. She labeled him according to the grief of the moment, reflecting the departure of God's glory. Thus, the boy grew up attached to a constant reminder of tragedy. Yet, his name also bears reminders of the presence of God.

Do you harbor negative nicknames for others?

—DS-G

22. She said, "The Glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."

This verse seems redundant, but the repetition conveys at least two points. First, we note who is speaking: Phinehas's wife *said* that the ark's capture means God's *glory* has left them. Her perspective may well represent many in Israel and even seem generally true. However, the verse reminds us that this opinion comes from a bereaved woman who is succumbing to childbirth. Her words affirm the depth of her despair.

Second, repetition underlines a point. The name "Ichabod" is not just a footnote of history. It expresses the abject disappointment that God did not deliver the Israelite army as they had hoped.

This section of the account ends with a focus on the loss of the ark of the covenant. Perhaps if God were still visible among his people, they could hold hope for restoration. Instead, they face defeat.

The multiple tragedies that befall Eli's household fulfill God's previous message to Eli: "I will cut short your strength and the strength of your priestly house" (1 Samuel 2:31; compare 3:13).

What Do You Think?

How does repetition show up in your spiritual life?

Digging Deeper

What is the role of repetition in the following Scriptures: Psalms 62, 136; Ecclesiastes 1:2; 3:1–8; Isaiah 6:3; and John 21:15–17?

Conclusion

A. Good Question, Wrong Answer

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?

What Do You Think?

Are there any items you tend to rely on for a sense of security or confidence?

Digging Deeper

What might God ask you to substitute for these physical objects to increase your reliance on him?

B. Prayer

Father God, we repent of the times we've tried to manipulate you for our advantage. In your mercy, forgive us for our arrogance. Help us submit to your will and your way. May we desire, like our Lord Jesus, "Not my will but yours be done." In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God is to be trusted, not manipulated.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student *(from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the* NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition*).*

Into the Lesson

Ask, "What is the ark of the covenant, and why was it so important to the Israelites?"

Option. Before class, look online for images of what the ark of the covenant may have looked like. Print copies to use during the lesson.

Briefly review the construction and purpose of the ark by reading Exodus 25:10–22 out loud. Discuss the symbolism of its various elements. Talk about what the ark symbolized.

Transition into the lesson by saying, "In today's lesson, we will learn about the devastating consequences of the Israelites' misplaced confidence."

Into the Word

Begin by summarizing the events that led up to today's lesson in 1 Samuel 4:1–11. Use notes from the Lesson Context to help. Explain why the Israelites brought the ark to the battlefield. Then ask the class, "What does the Israelites' response to defeat reveal about their understanding of God and their current relationship with him?"

Invite a volunteer to read 1 Samuel 4:12–18 aloud. Then ask the following questions for discussion: 1–What does the capture of the ark symbolize? 2–What does this passage teach us about the nature of God's presence and power? 3–What does it mean to trust in God fully? 4–What causes failure and dishonor for the Israelites?

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Eli's Fall" exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in small groups to complete as indicated. After calling time, invite groups to share their headlines with the class.

Divide the class into pairs. Ask a volunteer to read 1 Samuel 4:19–22 aloud. Have pairs answer the following questions: 1–What does the name "Ichabod" symbolize in this context? 2–How does Phinehas's wife's statement regarding the departure of glory from Israel reflect the nation's spiritual state? 3–When have you felt a sense of "Ichabod"? How has that experience shaped your faith and understanding of God?

Option. Return to the picture(s) of the ark. Discuss the concept of God's presence and sovereignty, visually represented by the ark. Discuss how the capture of the ark symbolizes the loss of God's presence among the people and its connection to their rejection of his rule. Then ask: "What are the consequences of neglecting God's sovereignty and presence?"

Into Life

Lead into the activity by saying, "'Ichabod moments' still occur today. Removing God from his rightful place in our daily lives is possible. When we realize our folly, the appropriate response is lament—an expression or prayer of grief and sorrow."

Write the following on the board:

LAMENT

- **Turn to God** (*Address God*)
- **Voice Complaint** (*Express pain, confusion, or disappointment*)
- **Ask for Help** (*Ask for God's deliverance*)
- **Express Trust** (*State confidence in God's faithfulness*)

Ask the class to participate in an activity designed for self-reflection and prayer. Distribute index cards and pens. Ask learners to use the elements of lament written on the board to direct their prayers. Instruct them to compose a lament for a time when they sought personal success and glory over God's will and glory. Suggest that laments may be expressed in many ways—as written prayers, poems, letters, or songs. Invite learners to use their laments to pray throughout the week. Close with a collective time of praise for a loving and faithful God.

Option. Distribute copies of the "Responding to Loss" activity from the activity page. Have learners work in small groups to complete as indicated.