



GOD ALONE • Learning to Trust God and Not Religion

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

1 Samuel 4:1-7:17

Because we are sinners, religion always looks more appealing than God Himself. First Samuel 4-7 shows that having symbols of God's presence is ultimately not as valuable as having the presence and blessing of God Himself. We can only experience this if we have a right relationship with God. Israel learns this lesson when God lets the Philistines conquer them in battle and capture the ark of the covenant, which is a physical representation of God's presence to the Israelites. The most important thing to catch in this section is that it points to the future day when God would embody His presence in Jesus Himself and in His people through His Spirit (cf. John 1:14; 14:16-17).

This narrative is a huge chunk. Feel free to read the whole thing, but remember that your students should have already read the passage before coming to the study (if they don't know to do this, tell them!). If you want to narrow the scope of what to read during the study, the questions below focus on 4:1-5:12; 6:1-7:17

The Israelites Lose the Ark to the Philistines (4:1-5:12)

At the beginning of our passage, Israel is about to go to battle against the rival Philistines. Evidently, the battle doesn't take long because by verse 2 there are 30,000 Israelites killed. Notice verse 3 when it says, "And when the troops came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, 'Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines?'" God is the one behind the battle, controlling the outcome. He is going to teach Israel a hard lesson about depending on Him alone.

After the tragedy on the battlefield, the Israelites don't turn to God. They turn to religion. They think the solution will be to "bring the ark of the covenant... that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies" (v. 3b). Here's the focus of our entire narrative: religion doesn't save; God does. The Israelites think a good luck charm would save them. They are wrong! In fact, Eli is so overwhelmed when he hears that the ark is captured by the Philistines that he falls off his chair, breaks his neck, and dies! When God's people turn to idols or symbols, he will use hard discipline to turn them in the right direction. Help your students make the connection to their lives, that even in today's world we tend to let our own idols and good luck charms take the place that only God should hold.

What's the Big Idea?

From watching Israel's battle with the Philistines and the struggle over possession of the ark we learn that God won't allow His people to substitute the blessing of His presence for a mere external representation. He is holy and He blesses His people when they turn to Him and worship Him alone.

What's the Problem?

Even though God is sufficient for us and worthy of our dependence, we tend to look to religion, idols, and morality for help and rescue in desperate times.



God Returns the Ark to Israel (6:1-7:2)

After God causes quite an episode at Ashdod in 5:1-12, the Philistines decide to return the ark to Israel. They send the ark back to Israel on a cow-drawn cart with an offering to God. Still unsure if their affliction was an act of God (it's kind of hard to miss if you ask me), they declare that if the cows pull the ark straight to Beth-shemesh, then God must have been the one causing the tumors, panic, and death in chapter 5. Well, the cows do pull the cart straight to the Israelite camp and when the Israelites see the ark coming, they rejoice (v. 13). Some of the men of Beth-shemesh even give offerings and sacrifices to the Lord, but others "looked upon the ark of the LORD" are struck down by God for doing so (6:19). There is weeping and mourning for the dead men, as the Israelites stand in awe of God. This incident teaches us that God is the "One who is high and lifted up" (Isaiah 57:15) and is utterly and infinitely holier than anyone on earth. We can learn from the Israelites here. Your group will benefit from marveling at the beauty of God's holiness.

Samuel Judges Israel (7:3-17)

Our narrative ends with Samuel judging Israel for their sins, namely the sin of idolatry. Remember that Samuel is a prophet and he speaks as one authorized by God to the people. In 7:3, he gives a beautiful promise to Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods... and direct your heart to the LORD and serve Him only, and He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." God uses Samuel to start a stream of repentance in Israel. "We have sinned against the Lord," they cry (v. 6). Understand that though God is a jealous God who wants our affections to be on Him alone, He is gracious and merciful to forgive us when we confess our sin, turn from idols, and run to Him.

In the midst of their confession and repentance, Israel is attacked by the Philistines again. Evidently, the Philistines have short-term memory loss. Though they won the first battle, God made life miserable for them in chapter 5 because they stole the ark and now they want revenge. This time, because Israel turned from their sin, God "thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were routed before Israel" (7:10b). God is faithful to His promises: confess and turn to Him and He will fight for us; continue to trust in idols and religion and God will certainly send harsh discipline.

Conclusion

During your preparation for the study, pray that the group would see their own idols and religiosity. Pray that they would be comforted to know that God has given us Jesus, so we might experience His presence and reap His blessing. Throughout the study, point your group to the fact that God is the one in control of the events in 1 Samuel 4-7 and that His desire for us is to trust in Him alone and not man-made religion.

What's Our Response?

Seek to know God, experience His presence, and reap His blessing through living by faith rather than by trusting in religion or material things.

What Are the Questions?

I Samuel 4:1-7:17

LAUNCH

What's the difference between trusting in religion and trusting in God?

EXPLORE

Read I Samuel 4:1-5:12

1. When the Philistines initially defeat the Israelites, how do the Israelites try to solve their problem?
2. How does the Israelites' strategy work when they face the Philistines again?
3. How does the daughter-in-law of Eli the priest assess the situation?
4. In what way does her ironic assessment point to a far greater loss of glory than the capture of the ark and the death of Israel's top religious leaders?
5. How does it go for the Philistines when they have the ark in their possession?
6. What do you think God is trying to show the Philistines?

Read I Samuel 6:1-7:2

7. How do the Philistines decide to deal with the trouble that has come upon them as a result of having the ark?
8. How do the people respond upon receiving the ark in Israelite territory?
9. How do the people respond when God strikes down those who looked into the ark? What does this say about God's character?

Read I Samuel 7:3-17

10. What is Samuel's focus as he interacts with the people of Israel?
11. How does God respond to Israel's repentance the next time they face a military challenge?

APPLY

12. The Israelites trusted in the ark as a spiritual "good luck charm." What are the spiritual "good luck charms" you find yourself trusting in?
13. Samuel's interaction with the Israelites in I Samuel 7 suggests that the root issue for God's people was idolatry: putting other things first in your heart rather than God. What things other than God are currently competing for the place of utmost affection in your heart?
14. God's people experience His presence and blessing today through his Spirit, who lives in those who trust in Christ. Read John 7:37-39 and talk about the picture you think Jesus is trying to paint for us.
15. As you examine this narrative, what are the main things it teaches us about God?

What Are the Answers?

1. They put the ark in their midst in the hope that it will deliver them in future battles.
2. The Philistines defeat them, capture the ark, and kill their top religious leaders.
3. She names her son Ichabod, which means “no glory” because in the loss of the ark and the death of the religious leaders she sees God’s glory departing from Israel.
4. The real loss of glory has come because God’s people have failed to trust Him, expressed in their reliance on other things like the ark and the corruption of their religious leaders.
5. God causes the Philistine god to lose its limbs, and He brings judgment on them for taking the ark, which is the sign of His presence that belongs with His people.
6. He wants the Philistines to know that their god is impotent and totally helpless when compared to the true God and that when they are opposed to Him, they only face destruction and death.
7. They decide to send the ark back to Israel on a cow-drawn cart with an offering to God. They decide that their affliction is an act of God if the cows pull the ark straight to Beth-shemesh.
8. They respond with gladness and offer a sacrifice.
9. They respond with amazement, wondering who can stand before this holy God. Their reaction shows that God is holy beyond any ability we have to understand.
10. Their need to return to the LORD with all their hearts, evidenced by turning from the foreign gods they had been serving.
11. He single-handedly defeated the Philistines by throwing them into confusion.
12. Allow the group to discuss.
13. Allow the group to discuss.
14. He’s painting a picture of super-abundant, overflowing life through His Spirit as a result of faith in Jesus Christ.
15. He won’t allow His people to substitute the blessing of His presence for a mere external representation. He is holy. He blesses His people as they turn to Him and worship Him alone.

Memorize

And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, “If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the LORD and serve Him only, and He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.”

I Samuel 7:3