

## End of an Era – 1 Samuel 4:1-22

### **Introduction:**

1 Samuel 3:1 contains these ominous words, “In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.” This comes in the midst of an account telling about temple worship at Shiloh, and a few faithful people like Elkanah and Hannah. We have been given a glimpse of what was happening in the name of religion at Shiloh, and it was not a pretty picture: disregard for God and all that was holy, prostituting God’s servants, disobedience and failure to stand up for what was right. God gave a warning, then foretold that all this would come to an end. The family that was responsible for this apostasy would be wiped out. A new day was dawning in the religious life of the nation, one that would find a prophet who would speak for God no matter what the cost. The new day came through Samuel.

God foretold the death of Hophni and Phinehas, but did not spell out how it would happen. 1 Samuel 4 spells out the circumstances of their death, and reveals the consequences of not putting God first in the life of the nation. God would once again use foreign powers to humble His people. God’s enemies would be his tools to humble a proud people, so that one day they could be a holy people.

### **The Philistine Threat – 1 Samuel 4:1-4**

1. In verse 1 we set the scene of what is to follow.
  - a. Who are the Philistines?
  - b. Where do the two opposing armies set up camp? What significance does each place bear? (Ebenezer = “stone of help” | Aphek – guarded trade route)
2. How did the battle go for the Israelites according to verse 2?
3. In verse 3 the elders try to make sense of their loss. What did they conclude? Why might this be? What did the elders decide was needed to bring victory? What was the rationale behind this?

4. Sometimes what is not said in scripture is just as important as what is said. 1 Samuel 4:1 tells us about Samuel, yet we will not hear about him again until chapter 7. How is the Word of the Lord (through the prophet) apparently viewed?
5. Word is sent to Shiloh, about 35 km away, to bring the Ark of the Covenant to the battlefield. Verse 4 describes the Ark of the Covenant, and what details are we given? How is the Ark being viewed by the armies of Israel?
6. Who accompanies the Ark to the battleground, according to verse 4? Is this detail significant?

### **Hope and then Despair – 1 Samuel 4:5-11**

7. How did the armies of Israel respond when the Ark of the Covenant came into their camp (vs. 5)?
8. The Philistines, camped two Kilometers away, heard the shout of the Israelite army. What is their response to this (v. 7)? What do they conclude has happened?
9. What in verse 8 tells us that the Philistines' knowledge of the God of Israel was incomplete or even inaccurate?
10. What do we learn about the relationship of the Hebrews (Israelites) to the Philistines in verse 9? What fear is used to motivate the Philistine army?
11. How did the battle go between the Philistines and the Israelites? (v. 10) What sad fact do we learn in verse 10?
12. Verse 11 tells us about a greater price paid in this battle than the loss of soldiers. What else was lost? Why was this important? We also read of the fulfillment of God's prophesy in regards to Hophni and Phinehas. What happens?

### **The Death of Eli – 1 Samuel 4:12-18**

13. In verse 12 we read about a man who survives the slaughter and makes his way back to Shiloh. He is described as wearing torn clothes and dust on his head. What did that symbolize?
14. What was Eli most concerned about according to verse 13?
15. How did the city of Shiloh respond to the news the man shared about the battle? (v. 13)
15. Eli hears the cries and asks what has happened. The man from the battle comes to Eli to share the news. What do we learn about Eli? (v. 15)
16. Eli wants to know how the battle went (v. 16). The Benjamite tells how things went. He starts with the general picture and moves towards details that affect Eli. Describe the progression in his account of the battle. (v. 17)
17. What affected Eli more, the death of his sons or the capture of the Ark? (v. 18) Why might this be?
18. Verse 18 describes the death of Eli. It is a tragic death, if not a little embarrassing. It is not an honourable death (cf. Abraham, Jacob, etc). Why might this be his ending?
19. Verse 18 tells us another role that Eli fulfilled, though it was not clear throughout the rest of the story. What role had he filled for forty years? What did this mean?

### **Ichabod – 1 Samuel 4:19-22**

20. In verse 19 we are introduced to Phinehas' wife. She is pregnant, and what brings on her labour?
21. Phinehas' wife does not survive childbirth. How do the women helping her try to encourage her? (v. 20) Did it work?
22. What does she name her son? (v. 21) What does that mean?

## Conclusion

“The glory has departed from Israel.” This could have been the headline to describe the time when Eli was judge of Israel. It was not because God had withdrawn from the life of the nation, but due to the fact the nation had pushed God out of its life. There was no respect for God even at the temple, as demonstrated by Hophni and Phinehas. The people complained but did nothing about it. The head priest and judge, Eli, also did nothing.

God loved Israel too much to leave things as they were. God warns Eli’s sons to change, but they refuse. So God tells them what lies ahead – death. But the whole nation would suffer this infidelity towards God, and they would lose 30,000 men in one battle, along with their coveted Ark of the Covenant. It is almost as if God is cleaning house. Even the high priest Eli comes to an ignominious end.

Still God has not left Israel. The glory has not departed after all. There is a man named Samuel who listens for the voice of God, who hears and recognizes that voice, and boldly declares what God has to say. Though the people did not see it, God’s glory was still present, and those who could look through eyes of faith would see it.

There are times it may feel like we could declare “Ichabod” over our nation, but take heart: God has not abandoned us. We may have turned our backs on God, but He is still present, and those who will diligently seek him will find he is here. So take courage, keep trusting and watch what God will do.