

Samuel to Solomon
The Problem of the Power of God:
Part 5

1 Samuel 4:1-11

As is not uncommon for human beings to long for God's power. Even if we do not understand a great deal about religion, we know that God (by definition) must be powerful. If there is some way in which God's power can be made to work for me, that is very attractive.

That, for many people, is the allure of religion.

The businessman, weighed down by anxieties, problems, and decisions, may—in a desperate moment—pray. What does he pray for? Why, that God's power might somehow work to keep him afloat, to give him success, perhaps even to inhibit his competitors. If religion can do that, then the businessman can see its value.

Gravely ill persons very often will pray. They may never have prayed before, but illness brings prayers out of many a prayer-less person! What do they pray for? Of course that God's power might work to make them well again. If religion can do that, then the sick person can see its value.

The student approaching exams is almost as likely as a sick person to think of prayer. What does the student pray for? For the power of God to work to make the questions easy and the answers good—and the teacher generous!

We could characterize religion as human attempts to harness God's power. Of course, it can be more subtle than the rather crass examples I have given. In its more refined forms these days it is called spirituality. But it is fair to say that religious or spiritual activities generally seek to harness God's power—or spiritual power—for us and our lives, even if it is just to find peace and tranquillity.

That is probably a big part of why religion is an almost universal phenomenon in the human race and why spirituality is a current craze in many places. The fact is that life in this world is always under threat of some kind. That is literally true: our lives are never completely safe. Life is always precarious and fragile. It is also true that everything we value in life is insecure. So it is no surprise that humans everywhere seek access to whatever power might be able to protect their lives and well-being. Hence the religions and spiritualities of the world.

But religion has always had one huge problem: How can we know *what to do* to access the power of God? If there is power beyond us, how can it be brought to help us?

The bewildering range of religions and spiritualities that humans have devised are very largely attempts to guess the answer to that question. The tragedy of the religions of the world is that they are no more than that—human guesses as to how to access the power of God. The guesses are random, uncertain, confused, and contradictory. The array of activities (from crystals to fasting, from meditation to sacraments) supposed to be means of encountering spiritual power is bizarre.

But there is another tragedy, and that is to have no interest in the power of God—or as the Apostle Paul described it, "holding the form of religion but denying the power of it" (2 Timothy 3:5, RSV). Formal religion, or merely intellectualized religion that reduces God's power to a concept, an idea, is as tragic as the pursuit of the power of God in ignorant ways. What could be more bizarre than a religion that *in reality* knows nothing of the power of God?

Do you know the power of God?

In the early pages of the book of 1 Samuel we have seen and heard of the power of God. The birth of Samuel to the childless Hannah was an answer to her prayer to God, the "LORD of hosts" (1 Samuel 1:11), a title that reminds us of God's power. Hannah prayed again, in response to the birth of her son, and spoke with great eloquence of God's power before whom "the bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength" (1 Samuel 2:4).

In 1 Samuel 4-6 we come to an episode in which what Hannah spoke of was displayed in a most remarkable way. These chapters are about the power of God, but what we will see will surprise us and challenge, on the one hand, every religious guess about God's power and, on the other hand, every religious person who denies God's power in practice.

The scene is set with two important pieces of information.

The Word Of Samuel (v. 1a)

And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. (v. 1a)

This picks up the story from the end of chapter 3. The last three verses of chapter 3 summarized the future in broad brushstrokes after the word of the Lord came to Samuel as a boy in the Shiloh temple. The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up and became great. As he spoke God's words, none of them failed. All Israel came to recognize Samuel as a faithful prophet of the Lord. And the Lord's word continued to come to him.

Chapters 4-6 will relate more detail about the events in which Samuel's words proved true and Israel came to understand that he was the Lord's prophet.

"The word of Samuel came to all Israel," as an introduction to chapters 4-6, is not a general summary statement, like the last few lines of chapter 3, but a reference to the beginning of his role as a prophet. The word of Samuel that came to all Israel was the word of the Lord that came to Samuel that night in the temple of Shiloh: "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle" (1 Samuel 3:11). That is the word of the Lord that came to Samuel. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.

The Philistines (v. 1b)

The second piece of information that sets the scene for what is about to happen is this: "Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek" (v. 1b).

It is not clear who instigated the hostilities. For the purposes of the story we are about to hear it does not matter. The point is that a battle was brewing.

The Philistines are not newcomers to the Bible story, although this is their first appearance in 1 Samuel. They will be major players until the end of this book, where they will again assemble at Aphek (1 Samuel 29:1), with consequences for Israel that will be terribly reminiscent of the episode before us.

The Philistines were, like the Israelites, relative newcomers to the region. They had settled mainly in the coastal plain to the west of the hill country where the main Israelite occupation had taken place at roughly the same time. They had five main cities—Ekron, Ashdod, Gath, Ashkelon, and Gaza—each with a "lord" or "king." Although the situation on the ground was no doubt more complex than we can now know, there appears to have been a long struggle for control of the region, in which the Philistines and the Israelites were leading protagonists. The former were based in the low land to the west, the latter in the hill country between that coastal plain and the Jordan Valley.

Aphek, where the Philistines set up camp, was to the north of their main territory suggesting that they may have been intent on expanding in that direction. Ebenezer, where the Israelites set up camp ready to confront them, probably lay just a short distance to the east of Aphek, in the foothills, about twenty miles west of Shiloh.

The First Defeat (vv. 2, 3)

What then happened was a disaster, from the Israelite point of view, and raised for them a serious question.

The Defeat (v. 2)

The disaster is reported with brevity:

The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. (v. 2)

It sounds like a serious defeat. The number is not absolutely clear. The Hebrew word for "thousand" may also have been used for a military unit, the size of which is unknown and may not have been fixed. However, even if the losses were well short of 4,000, they were serious. The defeat was a major blow to Israel.

The Question (v. 3)

Defeat in war is a crisis for any nation at any time. There are always serious consequences. If a particular defeat translates into a final victory for the enemy, then the prospects for the defeated nation are dim.

In the story of Israel, however, there was always more to it than that. This disaster fits into the pattern that had been going on for some 200 years, through the period covered by the book of Judges. Again and again the existence of the young nation of Israel was threatened.

Yet this people had entered this land with the extraordinary promises of God—promises of rest, of peace, of blessing. God had rescued this nation from more powerful enemies than the Philistines. Why, the most powerful nation of the day in the region, Egypt no less, had been forced by mighty acts of God's power to release this people from slavery so they could come and live here. Furthermore, by great acts of power God had unmistakably given the Israelites this land. All this he had done in faithfulness to the promises he had made (see Joshua 21:43-45). And yet, once again they were under threat—and were soundly defeated by the Philistines. Why?

That is the question the elders of Israel found themselves asking:

"And when the troops came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, 'Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines?'" (v. 3a).

The elders understood—up to a point—what had happened. They did not think that God was somehow absent from this battle. They saw their defeat as an act of God rather than as an achievement of the Philistines. In this they were right. Indeed the narrator's report in verse 2 hints as much. Literally it says, "Israel was defeated before the Philistines." The passive verb "was defeated" and the phrase "before [not "by"] the Philistines" indicate that the rout of the Israelites was the work of "a higher authority" than the Philistines. This is what the elders understood: "the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines."

What they did not understand was why.

Consider this response by the elders. Three facts should be kept in mind.

Firstly, Israel had experienced defeat at the hands of enemies before, and the question "Why?" had been asked before. Indeed the previous two centuries had many instances of Israelite suffering under enemy aggression. In each case the answer to the question "Why?" lay in the conduct of Israel.

Is it not surprising, then, that the elders did not say, "What have we done?"

Secondly, the corrupt behavior of Eli's sons, the priests at Shiloh, was well-known among all the people (see 1 Samuel 2:23). It is not unreasonable to suggest that the elders of Israel might have seen some connection between the wickedness of their priests and their defeat at the Lord's hands.

Thirdly, this is all the more so if, as we have suggested, the word of Samuel to all Israel was precisely the message of God's imminent punishment of the house of Eli. While it may not have been clear that this military defeat was somehow related to the punishment of Eli's house, the word of the Lord had been that he was about to do something that would make every ear that heard of it tingle.

The elders' question may be understandable enough, but we should be at least a little surprised at what they did not say. They did not "cry out to the LORD" as the people of Israel had done again and again in the period of the judges (see Judges 3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6, 7; 10:10, 12).

How far either an acknowledgment of sin or a cry for mercy was from their minds became clear with the proposal with which they answered their own "Why?" question:

"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" (v. 3b).

Probably the end of that sentence should read, "that *he* may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies."

We saw the ark in the temple at Shiloh in chapter 3 (v. 3). The elders' proposal reminds us of that night, as well as all we have seen going on at Shiloh.

The elders were probably not so crass as to think of the ark in simple magical terms, as if its presence would itself bring God's power to their side. The title "the ark of the *covenant* of the Lord" suggests that it was as a symbol of the covenant—that is, the commitment of the Lord to Israel—that the ark was to be brought. They would remind the Lord, so to speak, of his obligations to them: "Let us bring the ark of the covenant, so that the Lord will do what he has promised and save us from our enemies. He is supposed to smite Philistines, not Israelites!"

The Ark Of The Covenant Of The Lord Of Hosts Enthroned On The Cherubim (vv. 4-9)

The next stage of the story is about what happened when the ark was fetched from Shiloh.

The Ark from Shiloh (v. 4)

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. (v. 4a)

The narrator is making a powerful point with his astonishingly elaborate description of the ark. The elders may have decided to remind the Lord of his obligations toward them. But the narrator informs us that what came down from Shiloh was "the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim"! It is as though he is reminding us that he is the God of whom Hannah spoke. There is none like him, none besides him (1 Samuel 2:2)! Take care, elders of Israel. He is a God of knowledge, by whom deeds are weighed (1 Samuel 2:3). He is the mighty king.

The point being made becomes blindingly obvious when the narrator tells us who was carrying the ark:

"And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God" (v. 4b).

The elders and the people of Israel may not yet have understood, but the answer to their "Why?" question was not God's failure to keep the promise of the covenant represented by the ark, but the failure of the two wretches who were carrying the ark down from Shiloh.

Look back for a moment at these two brothers as they have appeared in the story so far. We first met them in 1 Samuel 1:3. We took little notice of them at that point. We were simply told that they were there at Shiloh and that they were "priests of the LORD."

It was in 1 Samuel 2:12-17 that we learned about their character and conduct. They were "worthless men." "They did not know the LORD." Their sin was "very great in the sight of the LORD, for [among other things!] the men treated the offering of the LORD with contempt."

In 1 Samuel 2:22-25 we heard of Eli's vain attempts to rebuke his sons. They did not listen, we are told in verse 25, "for it was the will of the LORD to put them to death." So far had they gone in their wickedness!

Then in 1 Samuel 2:27-34 a man of God came to Eli with a word from the Lord, bringing the awful news that punishment was coming on Eli's house, and that it would begin with the death of his two sons on the same day.

Then in chapter 3, when God called Samuel, his word was the same terrible message. He was about to do what he had said he would do with Eli's house. This message was delivered to all Israel in 1 Samuel 4:1.

Now in 1 Samuel 4:4 we might well tremble a little when we learn that the ark was being brought down from Shiloh by these two! Can Israel really appeal to the promises of God represented by the ark when that ark is being carried by reprobates who have despised God?

The Israelite Shout (v. 5)

However, these points have been made to us by the narrator. The elders and people of Israel had a rather different view of things:

"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" (v. 5).

The people, of course, had not read verse 4! They saw the ark as it is described here—"the ark of the covenant of the LORD." The promise of God was brought into their camp. Small wonder that pandemonium broke out! The earth shook with the sound of it!

The Philistine Fear (vv. 6-9)

A short distance away, another army heard the noise. What do you think happened down in Aphek?

"And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, 'What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?'" (v. 6a).

"The Hebrews" is what foreigners often called the people of Israel, at times in an apparently derogatory tone (see 1 Samuel 4:9; 13:19; 14:11; 29:3; cf. Genesis 39:14, 17; 41:12; Exodus 1:19, 22; 2:6). "The Hebrews" had just been soundly defeated by the Philistines. What did they have to shout about?

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." (vv. 6b, 7)

The reaction of the Philistines is a surprise. They had just shown their military superiority over the Israelites. What made them think they had anything to fear? Remarkably it was because they had heard the gospel of the exodus. Listen to them:

"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." (v. 8)

The news of what God had done many years earlier in Egypt had spread. The Philistines, rightly, trembled at the idea of finding themselves up against this God—or these gods (they were not quite clear on that point).

If the Philistines really believed that the God/gods of the exodus had come among the Hebrews, what would be the sensible thing for them to do? What would you do if you faced the prospect of encountering God Almighty on the side of your enemies? Perhaps you would like to assess the intelligence of the Philistines, based on their plan in verse 9:

"Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight" (v. 9).

Brave or stupid? They would have done well to have heard Hannah's prayer: "not by might shall a man prevail" (1 Samuel 2:9)!

The Second Defeat (vv. 10, 11)

So what happened then? Given the terror of the Philistines and the elated confidence of the Israelites, the expectations of all the characters in the story lean one way (even if we readers know a little better).

The Defeat (v. 10)

This is what happened:

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 thirty thousand foot soldiers. (v. 10)

It was a terrible slaughter! But it was the wrong way around. Thirty thousand *Israelites* were dead. Even if "thousand" means less than a thousand, there were many more casualties this time than last! What God had done to the Egyptians, he had now done to the Israelites!

What could this defeat mean? There are two final pieces of information that we need to hear.

The Ark (v. 11a)

And the ark of God was captured... (v. 11a)

The consequences of this extraordinary fact will be played out to the end of chapter 6. For the moment consider the fact itself: the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim was taken by the pagan Philistines! It is worth noticing that now it is simply called "the ark of God." The fancy titles hardly seem appropriate anymore. It was beginning to look as though the Philistines were more brave than stupid after all. It is enough to make your ears tingle, don't you think?

The Sons of Eli (v. 11b)

The last note in verse 11 is:

"... and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died."

And that, we must now realize, is what this whole sorry episode was about. There is a lot more of this story to come, but to understand this beginning, we need to see that it was about these two men. The Lord did as he had said he would do.

This is a terribly disturbing story. There is much that should be said. Let us conclude with three specific reflections.

Firstly, we have seen something important in this story about God's power.

The power of the God of whom the Bible speaks cannot be manipulated by human activities.

In retrospect, there was a certain madness about the elders of Israel thinking that bringing the ark would bring God's power onto their side. If religion is the attempt by human beings to harness God's power to their own advantage, this story is testimony to the fact that it cannot be done.

If the ark of the covenant of the Lord could not guarantee Israel's safety, then no other religious act will do it. My church attendance, my Bible reading, my prayers, my giving, my meditation—or whatever religious activities I practice—cannot manipulate God's power to bring me success, prosperity, or happiness.

God's power is not like that. It is not at our disposal. God's power is *God's* power. This episode should impress on us that much.

Secondly, the actions of the elders of Israel cannot be equated with all human attempts at religion. The ark of the covenant was not just any religious object. It was the God-given bearer of the promise of God!

We have the promise of God. It is no longer written on stone tablets in a gold-plated box. The bearer of God's promise to us is Jesus Christ.

The story of the connection between the ark we have seen brought from Shiloh and the person of Jesus Christ is told through the pages of the Bible as a whole, and we will have reason to return to that story in the following chapters. At this point consider how the elders of Israel thought they could secure God's power by bringing the ark and how it is possible to think similarly that we might secure the power of God by taking hold of Jesus.

The terrible delusion we have seen is the thought that you can depend on the promises of God while paying no regard to his demands.

Christian reader, hear this. You cannot put your trust in God's kindness toward you in Jesus Christ—as the Israelites shouted with joy in the promises represented by the ark of the covenant—and at the same time ignore God's demand for holiness in your life.

The Israelites' joyful trust in the ark, and what the ark represented, meant nothing—it was false—so long as they paid no regard to the demands of the covenant, so flagrantly disdained by Hophni and Phinehas. The truth we are seeing here is that you cannot have Jesus Christ as Savior without having him as Lord.

Thirdly, it is appropriate to conclude with the following words from the New Testament about what it means to know the power of God. The Apostle Paul told the Ephesians he prayed:

... that you may know... what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.... And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.... But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us... made us alive together with Christ —by grace you have been saved —and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship,

created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 1:18-2:10)

That is what it is to know the immeasurable greatness of God's power toward us who believe.