

## Samuel to Solomon Where Is the Glory?

### Part 6

#### *1 Samuel 4:12-22*

Here is a question worth asking yourself: Where is the glory? It is a strange question—and the reason for asking it here will be clear when we reach the end of 1 Samuel 4. But it is a valuable and searching question. There are many forms of glory in life. Many of them are fleeting. Much glory fades with time. The glory of the celebrity is like that, as is the glory of wealth. Where is the glory for you? Where is the glory that matters to you? Where is the glory you seek and long for? Where is the glory?

As you consider that question, let us return to the story of Israel's experience in the days when Samuel had become a prophet and the Philistines had become a menace.

In the first half of 1 Samuel 4 we heard about how the Israelites suffered, twice over, a devastating defeat at the hands of the Philistines. Many had died. The ark of the covenant had been taken. The priests Hophni and Phinehas had been killed.

The real problem, however, was not the Philistines. Israel had encountered the problem of the power of God. God was more than powerful enough to deliver them from the Philistines. Even the Philistines knew that! But the Israelites could not *control* the power of God. They found themselves on the wrong side of that power as God came *against* them in judgment. The Philistines were just his unwitting instruments. There was absolutely nothing that the Israelites could do to save themselves.

In 1 Samuel 4:12-22 we hear how the news of this disaster reached the city of Shiloh, how Eli heard it and also Phinehas's wife. The impact of the news on Eli and the response of his daughter-in-law are the main concerns of this passage. Just as Hannah's prayer in chapter 2 gave us the most profound insight into the events of chapter 1, so now the words of another woman, after the birth of another son, will show us the extraordinary significance of what had happened.

We are shown two scenes. In the first the news of the Philistine victory reaches the city, and Eli learns of what had happened. In the second we are taken into a more intimate, private scene as the terrible news reaches the wife of Phinehas.

#### **Shiloh And Eli (vv. 12-18)**

##### **The News Reached the City (Vv. 12, 13)**

The sequence of events begins in verse 12 with a messenger who escaped from the scene of the battle and ran the twenty miles up into the hills to Shiloh. The story is now told from the perspective of the city as the escapee approached.

The Approaching Messenger (v. 12)

*A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head. (v. 12)*

That he was a man of Benjamin is one of those details that seems of small consequence. Biblical writers, however, rarely include details for no reason at all. It will not be long before Israel's hopes will be pinned on another Benjaminite. Then we will have reason to remember this man of Benjamin who, on the very day that Israel suffered that crushing defeat, ran the grueling road all the way up to Shiloh with his dreadful news.

As he approached the city, his appearance spoke volumes. His clothes were torn, and he had dirt on his head. This was more than the disheveled appearance of a man who had fled in haste from the battle and then run all the way to Shiloh. In addition to the mess he must have been, there were the

clear and visible signs of mourning and grief. One look at him, and it was plain that he brought bad news. I picture him with tears streaming down his face. Look at him, and you dread what he is about to say.

#### The Waiting Old Man (v. 13a)

Before we hear him, however, our attention is drawn to the figure of an old man beside the road:

"When he arrived, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God" (v. 13a).

Eli was sitting, as he had been when we first saw him in 1 Samuel 1:9. Then he was "Eli the priest," "sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD." Now he is just "Eli," and he was no longer by the temple. These were not good days for Eli. We already know that Eli was very old, and his eyesight was fading (1 Samuel 2:22; 3:2). It is no surprise to see him sitting, waiting. He was not capable of doing much more.

Eli's frailty is underlined by a detail unusual in Biblical narratives, an insight into the old man's emotional state. Literally it says, "His heart was trembling *on account of the ark of God*."

What was it about the ark that made Eli's heart tremble? After all, the Philistines had been terrified at the news of the ark coming into the Israelite camp (1 Samuel 4:7). What did Eli know that the Philistines did not know? The Israelites had shouted with joyful confidence at the ark's arrival (1 Samuel 4:5). Why did Eli's heart tremble? What did Eli know that the Israelites did not know? We know now that both the Philistines and the Israelites were mistaken, but that news had not yet reached Eli. Why, then, was he shaking so?

What Eli knew was that God had promised that his two sons were going to die on the same day, and he had learned that this was about to happen (1 Samuel 2:34; 3:11, 12, 18). It was not, I think, that he was anxious *for* the ark. Eli was terrified *on account of the ark*. He feared for his sons, who were carrying the ark of the God who had promised this punishment.

The Israelites *should* have known this too, for the word of Samuel—which we have concluded was probably this same word of the Lord about the house of Eli—had come to all Israel (1 Samuel 4:1). They seem to have forgotten, but Eli could not forget. No wonder he was shaking!

#### The City's Response (v. 13b)

For the moment we leave him there on his seat, watching, waiting, trembling. For the man of Benjamin seems to have run straight past old Eli and into the city, where he told his news: "And when the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out" (v. 13b).

Just as the man hardly needed to speak—his appearance told it all—so we do not need to hear what he said. We know too well.

What we are told is that "all the city cried out," reminding us of the mighty shout from "all Israel" a little earlier when the ark had come down from Shiloh to the camp at Ebenezer (1 Samuel 4:5). This time, however, the cry had a different tone.

#### The News Reached Eli (vv. 14-17)

As the cry from the city rang out, our attention is turned back to the old man sitting, trembling with fear, beside the road (or wherever he precisely was).

#### Eli's Question (v. 14)

He heard the cry, and in a way strangely reminiscent of the Philistines when they heard the earlier cry (1 Samuel 4:6), he asked a question: "What is this uproar?" (v. 14a).

Unlike the Philistines, however, who answered their own question, Eli dared not draw the conclusion that he must have suspected. He did not have to wait long: "Then the man hurried and came and told Eli" (v. 14b).

### **Eli's Age** (v. 15)

Before we hear what the man said to Eli, once again the narrator pauses to remind us of his age and infirmity:

"Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set so that he could not see" (v. 15).

Some time had passed since 1 Samuel 3:2, where we learned of his failing sight. Now he was completely blind. There is a touch of sad irony here. The man sitting, trembling with fear, "watching" the road in verse 13, was totally blind! That is why, of course, he had not drawn the obvious conclusions from the appearance of the bedraggled man of Benjamin who must have run right past him a short time earlier. Weak, blind, trembling old Eli—Israel's leader—needed to ask what the uproar meant.

### **Eli's News** (vv. 16, 17)

The news was delivered in agonizing stages:

"And the man said to Eli, 'I am he who has come from the battle; I fled from the battle today'" (v. 16a).

No doubt exhausted and emotionally drained, the man stammered out his words, repeating himself unnecessarily. Even as he identified himself, however, if his tone of voice did not betray him, his words already implied his bad news:

"I *fled* from the battle today." "And [Eli] said, 'How did it go, my son?'" (v. 16b).

As though he needed to ask! The news came, whether deliberately or not, in dramatic sequence:

"He who brought the news answered and said, 'Israel has fled before the Philistines....'" (v. 17a).

Just the opposite of what had been expected by both the Israelites and the Philistines! This first piece of news was disastrous enough. But he added,

"and there has also been a great defeat among the people" (v. 17b)—probably better translated "a great slaughter,"

as in 2 Samuel 17:9 (cf. 18:7). This was not a minor setback in the ongoing conflict with the Philistines. This was a disaster of huge proportions. Many, many were dead.

In the original you can sense the man's emotion as he stuttered or blurted this news. He said,

"Israel has fled before the Philistines, *and also* there was a great slaughter among the people, *and also*..." There was more. "Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead..." (v. 17c).

It was as Eli had feared. His heart had been right to tremble on account of the ark of God. The word of God had come to pass. Samuel's words had not fallen to the ground.

It is very important to take great care with an incident in the Bible like this. Like Hannah and her childlessness in chapter 1 and the gift of a son in answer to her prayer, the uniqueness of the particular circumstance must be appreciated. Hannah's experience had a place in God's purposes that was not the same as every childless woman in Israel then or in our world today who may have been blessed with a child in answer to prayer. Just so, the deaths of Hophni and Phinehas in the terrible battle of Aphek were not the same as the tragic deaths of many other sons that day or the many family tragedies that occur today.

Eli's tragedy was different. He had the specific word of the Lord concerning his sons and concerning his house. It was a terrible word. And the deaths of Hophni and Phinehas were the sign to Eli (1 Samuel 2:34). The word of the Lord had come to pass and would come to pass.

The man of Benjamin had one last thing to say: "... and the ark of God has been captured" (v. 17d).

As this messenger told it, this was the climactic piece of news. The defeat and the slaughter, including Eli's sons, were terrible. But the ark of God taken by the Philistines! What could that mean for the whole nation?

### **Eli's Death (v. 18)**

*As soon as he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. (v. 18a)*

Curiously, the writer does not tell us that it was the news that the ark had been *taken* that killed Eli. In a strange expression, he tells us that it was the mention of the ark itself. This confirmed his great fear. The God of the covenant, whose ark it was, had dealt with Eli's sons. And Eli knew that this was the beginning of the judgment. It was the mention of the ark that killed him.

Notice how the old man died. If he was sitting on top of the gate, the scene was all the more dramatic! Be that as it may, the fall killed him because of his great age and his great weight.

Eli is given by the writer a brief obituary:

"He had judged Israel forty years" (v. 18b).

It is possible that this is a piece of sad irony. The sentence echoes the repeated summaries of the lives of Israel's "judges" through the book of Judges (10:2, 3; 12:7, 9, 11, 14; 15:20; 16:31). However, Eli is nowhere else said to have "judged" Israel, and he is nowhere called a "judge." Israel's past experience of "judges" could be summed up in these words:

"Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge" (Judges 2:18).

In reality Eli had not "judged" Israel—not like that. We noted in 1 Samuel 3:13 that God announced he himself was about to "judge" Eli's house. After forty years of Eli's leadership, the Israelites had suffered a crushing defeat, and for the first time ever the ark of God had been taken from them. That is the kind of "judge" Israel could do without!

### **Eli's Daughter-In-Law (vv. 19-22)**

From the publicly visible and audible events in the city and at the gate, the next scene takes us to a more private moment, where we will see yet another tragedy and hear a deeper insight into what had happened.

We are taken into a home in Shiloh, where the wife of Phinehas was at the point of giving birth.

### **The News Reached Her (v. 19a)**

The news came to her in a dramatic, though unchronological sequence:

*Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. And when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead... (v. 19a)*

As she heard it, the headline news was the capture of the ark, then Eli's death, then the death of her husband. The news came closer and closer to home.

## **A Life... and a Death (vv. 19b, 20)**

The shock brought on her labor:

"... she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her" (v. 19b).

In this terrible story we have heard of so many deaths, and a new life. But the new life was accompanied by yet another death, for the mother died.

The women attending her tried to comfort her as she was dying: "And about the time of her death the women attending her said to her,

'Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son'" (v. 20a).

The news did not touch her:

"But she did not answer or pay attention" (v. 20b).

The earlier news was too much.

## **Ichabod: Where Is the Glory? (vv. 21, 22)**

But she named the boy before she died. The name was her response to the news that had come:

*And 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. And she said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured." (vv. 21, 22)*

The name "Ichabod" means -- "Where is the glory?" or "No Glory" -- The glory was exiled from Israel.

The story is far from over, but we might well pause at this point and reflect on these words of Phinehas's wife. Where is the glory?

There is a dreadful play on words in this story. The description of old Eli in verse 18 tells us that he "was... heavy." The Hebrew word is *kabed*, the verb form of *kabod*, "glory." Eli had been the glory, the *kabod*, of Israel—her priest, teacher, mediator, representative. But the glory of Eli had become no more than his old bulk—and it had killed him. Where is the glory? Dead by the road out of Shiloh.

The ark, kept in the tabernacle, had long been associated with the glory of God. In the days of Moses, "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34, 35). Where is the glory? Captured and taken by the Philistines!

The story in 1 Samuel 4 is actually a miniature of the history of Israel as it unfolds through the whole Old Testament. Eventually this nation was driven from the land by the Assyrians and then the Babylonians, and everything that represented their special relationship with God was destroyed. It was the very lowest point in Israel's long history. The experience at Aphek was a foretaste of it. In the land of Babylon -- Ezekiel became a prophet to the survivors. He saw a vision of the glory of the Lord departing from the temple in Jerusalem and going to Babylon (Ezekiel 10). The glory was exiled!

The Bible story calls us to think rather differently about glory. Where is the glory now? The Bible has an answer to that question, if we will hear it. John put it like this: "The Word became flesh and dwelt [tabernacled] among us, and we have seen his glory" (John 1:14). The glory has now come—in Jesus Christ.

What does that mean?

Just before his death Jesus prayed:

*Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*  
(John 17:24)

Those who will be with Jesus, where he is, will see *his* glory.

Israel's experience raised a vitally important question—where is the glory? It is not just a question for Israel. Where is the glory for you?

## **The Problem of the Power of God: II**

### **1 Samuel 5**

Defying the power of God is a common human game. I wonder whether you have played it? This is how it goes.

You know about God and his power.

You have heard about some of the things that he has done.

Perhaps you have even heard about some of the things that he has promised to do.

Yet you respond *defiantly*.

Why let the power of God disturb your life?

Why doubt for a moment that your human strength and ingenuity is all you need to match God's power?

Put like that, it sounds rather stupid. And yet we are surrounded by people playing that game every day. Perhaps we join in from time to time. We live in such a brave world! The power of God causes few to tremble.

Those of us who know God know that this game is the greatest stupidity in the world. The trouble is, we have to admit that it *looks* as though you can get away with it. So often it looks like the Philistines, who faced the power of God with their brave words ("Take courage, and be men, O Philistines," 1 Samuel 4:9), got away with it! They won! They defeated the Israelites and captured the ark of the covenant as a trophy! Those around us who defy God and rely on their human strength to get on without him seem to do all right. Like the Philistines, they seem to win more than their share of life's battles.

Defying God is not something that *looks* particularly stupid. And so it is rare to meet a person who is *afraid* of defying God. Do you find yourself trembling for those you see defying God and his power? I suspect not.

Some aspects of the story we have been following in 1 Samuel 4 are strange to us. The peculiar features of the events narrated there are important (and we will be focusing on one of them shortly), but we would be foolish to overlook the obvious fact that there is something about this story with which we are very familiar. It is a story about people playing a game we all know too well: the Israelites were presuming on, and the Philistines were defying, the power of God. The Israelites' presumption turned to desperation as they suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of their enemies. What is to be said about the Philistines' defiance?

The feature of the story that inevitably strikes any reader today as strange is the role played by the gold-plated box known as the ark of the covenant. The elders of Israel thought that bringing the ark down from Shiloh to their camp in Ebenezer would result in God's saving them from the Philistines. It didn't. The Philistines thought that the ark's presence in the Israelite camp posed a terrible threat to

them. It didn't. When the Philistines crushed the Israelites, killing many, they killed the two priests who carried the ark and took the ark itself.

Now we know (from the preceding narrative, particularly chapters 2-3) that these terrible events had a cause. The two priests were at the heart of it. They were wicked men. They had utterly failed in their God-given duty to be priests for the people of Israel. In particular they showed contempt for the sacrifices and offerings that God had prescribed as the means of dealing with the people's sins. The terrible defeat the Israelites suffered at the hands of the Philistines was God's judgment, on the one hand, on the priests who had so failed in their duty, but on the other hand, that judgment had dreadful consequences for the people of Israel for whom the sacrificial system had been corrupted.

The consequences for Israel were put into words by the dying mother of Ichabod: "The glory has departed [or, has gone into exile] from Israel!" (1 Samuel 4:21, 22). That was an eloquent expression of the tragedy. If God had rejected his priests, who had been appointed to provide the mediation that Israel needed with their holy God, and if God had allowed the ark of the covenant, the very sign and symbol of his commitment to Israel, to be taken by the Philistines, then Israel had lost everything that really mattered. So it certainly seemed.

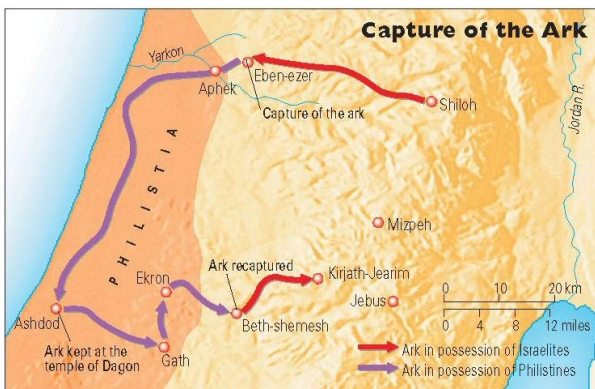
As we read on into chapter 5, we leave the Israelites behind for a while. We will return to them at the end of chapter 6. In the meantime we are taken down to the victorious Philistines, who had taken the ark as a trophy of their triumph.

### The Double Defeat Of Dagon (vv. 1-5)

Biblical narrative often does interesting things with the time sequence of events. Since 1 Samuel 5:1 ("the Philistines captured the ark of God") takes up the story from precisely 1 Samuel 4:11 ("the ark of God was captured"), the effect is to set the events that are about to be narrated *alongside* the happenings at Shiloh that we saw in 1 Samuel 4:12-22. We are about to hear what was happening among the Philistines as the news of the ark's capture brought death and despair in Shiloh.

### The "Defeated" Ark (vv. 1, 2)

*When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. (v. 1)*



Ebenezer was in the western foothills of the Israelite territory. Ashdod was some thirty miles to the southwest, close to the coast and in the heart of the Philistine territory. There were four other Philistine cities, two also near the coast but further south, and two to the east. Ashdod was the most centrally located of the five cities.

The Philistines did with the ark what they would have done with any religious trophy won from an enemy in war: "Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it

into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon"

Dagon was probably the highest of the Philistine gods (cf. Judges 16:23; 1 Chronicles 10:10). He is thought to have been a god associated with vegetation and fertility. Setting up the ark of the God of the Hebrews "beside Dagon"—that is, beside the image of Dagon in the Dagon temple—was a great coup. There could be no more powerful expression of who had won. The ark of the god of the Hebrews captive in the house of Dagon showed not just which nation had triumphed, but whose god had won!



In the first few lines of the chapter you can detect the immense sense of satisfaction among the Philistines. They are the conquering subject of every verb: they "captured," they "brought," they "took," they "set up." The ark of the Hebrew god, the passive object of each verb, was completely in their power and control, just as the people of Israel had been crushed beneath their might.

The Philistines knew that even the mighty Egyptians had been unable to successfully defy the god of the Hebrews (1 Samuel 4:8)!

The Philistine treatment of the ark suggests that they thought of it as an idol, like their image of Dagon. They may have thought that they were adding the Hebrew god to Dagon's pantheon. More probably they were displaying his subservience to their deity.

### **Dagon's Demise (vv. 3, 4)**

However, overnight something happened in Dagon's temple. We are not told what. We are simply shown what the people of Ashdod saw early the next morning:

1 Samuel 5:3-4 (NASB)

<sup>3</sup> *When the Ashdodites arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face .....*

Since the Philistines captured the ark it has been called, simply, "the ark of God" (1 Samuel 4:11, 13, for the Israelites as "the ark of the covenant of the LORD [Yahweh]." How could it be seen as representing God's commitment to Israel when it now signified Israel's defeat because it was in the enemy's hands?

But for the first time since its capture, the narrator calls it "the ark of the LORD [Yahweh]," the name by which God had made himself known to his people Israel.

This title seems appropriate for the ark this morning—to the narrator, even if not yet to the people of Ashdod—for the sight of Dagon, fallen off his perch, with his face in the dirt "*before the ark of the LORD,*" is delicious!

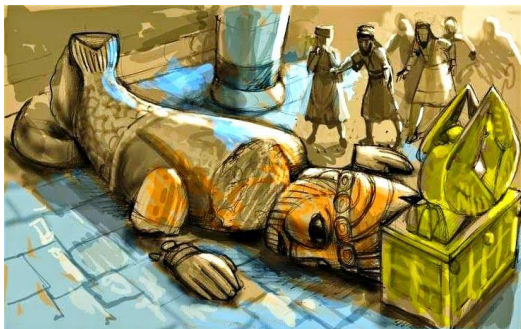
Very quickly the Ashdodites put things right again: "So they took Dagon and put him back in his place" (v. 3b).

The narrator is enjoying this and expects his hearers to enjoy it too! I wonder whether many years later Isaiah recalled this scene when he launched his biting mockery of the idols of Babylon:

*"They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place" (Isaiah 46:7).*

Dagon moved from his place, but he could not get back again! *They* had to lift the poor fellow back to his feet. *They* had to put him back in his place. What a god, great Dagon!

The next night there was more action in Dagon's temple. Again we see nothing of the action—we are just allowed to join the people of Ashdod when they came to the temple, once again early in the morning:



*But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. (v. 4)*

Oh, dear!

Notice how the writer reminds us again that it was "the ark of the LORD [Yahweh]." And before the ark now was only what



was left of Dagon. His head and hands had been "cut off—"chopped off is one translation! The severed bits of Dagon were lying on the threshold. The last sentence in verse 4 is delightfully curious in the Hebrew. Literally it says, "Only Dagon remained on him." No head, no hands, only Dagon—a delightful way of saying what Dagon was. He never could think or speak or act. So chop off his head and hands, and you still have Dagon left! Can you see the mighty Dagon of the Philistines now? Headless, handless—only Dagon remaining on him!

### **"In Ashdod to This Day" (v. 5)**

I sense that the narrator can hardly keep a straight face at this point, for he adds:

*"This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day" (v. 5).*

To this day, he says (no doubt writing years after these events), everyone who goes into Dagon's temple remembers this night and is not game to touch the doorstep where Dagon's head and arms were ripped off!

It is worth pausing and remembering that at about this time up in the hills at Shiloh a dying mother named her baby "Where is the glory?" She said, "The glory has departed from Israel!" (1 Samuel 4:21). Down by the coast in Ashdod, someone was getting some glory! If we can't see that yet, just read on.

### **The Heavy Hand Of God (vv. 6-10)**

The events in the temple of Dagon were just the beginning of the Philistines' troubles. The second phase of their difficulties is introduced with the words

*"The hand of the LORD was heavy..." (v. 6a).*

There are two powerful points in that phrase. As Dagon lay in the dirt, handless, the one whose name belonged to the ark was not handless! Dagon could do nothing. He never could, of course, but now his powerlessness was on display. The Lord, Yahweh, was the powerful one—in the temple of Dagon and, as we will see shortly, anywhere else.

The hand of the Lord was "heavy." The word play cannot be translated into English, but we noted earlier that in Hebrew one word, *kabod*, means "glory" and "heavy." The mother said in Shiloh, "Where is the *kabod*?" Now we learn that in Ashdod the hand of the Lord was *kabod*!

### **In Ashdod (vv. 6-8)**

What did that mean for the Philistines of Ashdod?

*"The hand of the LORD was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory" (v. 6).*

Terror filled the people of Ashdod and the surrounding region as a plague of tumors spread. It has been suggested that this may have been an outbreak of bubonic plague. Whatever it was, it was sufficient to greatly frighten them.

The men of Ashdod made the connection between the tumors, the smashing of Dagon, and the presence of the ark of the God of Israel in their midst.

*And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god." (v. 7)*

They were not entirely stupid, the men of Ashdod! They were precisely right in the connections drawn and the conclusion deduced.

Curiously they were in a very similar situation to the Israelites at the beginning of this saga. God's people had drawn the correct conclusion that their defeat before the Philistines was the Lord's doing (1 Samuel 4:3). Just as the Israelite elders had put their heads together to consider what to do, so now the lords of the Philistines—that is, the five kings of the five Philistine cities—were assembled for a crisis meeting. "So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, 'What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?'" (v. 8a).

The elders of Israel had thought that the ark of the covenant of the Lord was the answer to their problems. The lords of the Philistines were sure that it was the presence of the ark in Ashdod that was the cause of their difficulties.

We might speculate as to what the wisest course of action might have been at this point. If you had been present at that crisis meeting, would you have had a proposal to put forward? We do not know whether there was a lengthy discussion or a debate. We do know that a plan of action emerged from the meeting:

*"They answered, 'Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath'" (v. 8b).*

The logic behind this proposal is less than transparent. I would love to know what the lord of Gath had to say about it! Still, he was outnumbered four to one. Why Gath? We can only guess. It was the Philistine city furthest to the east from Ashdod and closest to the Israelite hills. But perhaps the king of Gath was the weakest member of the meeting.

Their decision does reveal one thing clearly. At this stage they had no intention of relinquishing control of the ark.

*"So they brought the ark of the God of Israel there" (v. 8c).*

### **In Gath (v. 9)**

We are not entirely surprised to hear what happened next:

*But after they had brought it around, the hand of the LORD was against the city, causing a very great panic, and he afflicted the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them. (v. 9)*

This could be translated, "the hand of the LORD was *in* the city." The consequence was a very great panic. The word translated "panic" is extraordinary because the reaction was extraordinary. The word typically describes the terror that God brought on the enemies of Israel in war, leading to destruction, and is sometimes translated "confusion" or "tumult" (see Deuteronomy 7:23; 28:20; 1 Samuel 14:20; Isaiah 22:5; Ezekiel 7:7). The people understood themselves to be under attack from the Lord.

It is worth remembering that these are the Philistines who called on one another to "be men and fight" in 1 Samuel 4:9. But under attack from God they trembled.

### **In Ekron (v. 10)**

There does not appear to have been another crisis meeting. Without consultation the people of Gath decided to send the thing to Ekron, the next Philistine city, the closest to Gath.

*So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. But as soon as the ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, "They have brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people." (v. 10)*

They protested vehemently, before anything even happened. Whatever happened to "Be men and fight"? There was now nothing but terrified panic.

### **The Glory (vv. 11, 12)**

Our chapter concludes with the complete capitulation of the Philistines.

## **Surrender (v. 11a)**

Another desperate meeting of the lords was called. The people did not seem now to ask the lords for advice, as last time. They gave them instructions:

*They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people." (v. 11a)*

Just as they had put Dagon back "in his place" (v. 3), they thought it was time to return the ark of the God of Israel "to its [or his] own place." This, however, was an act of complete surrender.

## **Terror (v. 11b)**

The reason for the decision was simple:

*"For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city" (v. 11b).*

Literally, "a panic of death."

## **The Heavy Hand (vv. 11c, 12)**

*The hand of God was very heavy there. (v. 11c)*

If you have been wondering where was the glory, here is the answer.

The chapter concludes:

*"The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven" (v. 12).*

It was like the cry of the Israelites in Egypt. Is this not a remarkable turn of events? The Philistines who had defied God, fearing that they would become slaves of the Hebrews, found themselves crying out to heaven, just like the Hebrews when they were slaves of the Egyptians.

All this happened a long time ago. It is, however, part of a pattern. This is how it is with defiance of God. For a time people get away with it, and it looks as though defying God is feasible. But it is not feasible.

We cannot but hear this story alongside another story, which is about the greatest of all God's defeats over his enemies. It was when Jesus died on the cross.

That was the moment in the history of the world when defiance of God had "got away with it." God's Christ, God's Son, was nailed to a cross, executed in weakness. When you look at the cross, who is the defeated one? As Jesus was crucified, it was like the ark being taken captive. Who was the victorious one then?

But early on another morning something had happened in the tomb where they had laid him, which leaves the surprise in the temple in Ashdod far behind. And the Bible tells us that the apparently defeated one was in fact the powerful victor:

*He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in it [literal translation, referring to the cross]. (Colossians 2:15)*

To defy God is as stupid as it sounds, and far more stupid than it often looks. Don't do it.