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1 SAMUEL 4:1-7:17

We have an enormous amount of ground to cover today, so let's get right into it...and listen fast!! Let me just summarize for you the **4th chapter of 1 Samuel**.

The Philistines were the arch enemies of the children of Israel. The Philistines were brutal, war loving, blood-thirsty people and the children of Israel had been dominated and afflicted by them for a long time.

Chapter 4 tells us that the children of Israel went against the Philistines and the Philistines soundly defeated them. In fact, **verse 2** tells us the Philistines killed 4,000 Israelite men.

Well, the children of Israel called a meeting and decided the Lord had allowed this to happen because they hadn't taken the ark of the covenant into battle with them...so they sent to Shiloh and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, accompanied the ark back to the camp. (By the way, Hophni and Phinehas weren't even supposed to enter the Holy of Holies. Who was supposed to enter the Holy of Holies? THE HIGH PRIEST!! These sons of Eli were not high priests...and this is yet one more sign of their disobedience!!) **When they entered the camp with the ark the people shouted with a great shout and were so happy the ark was there!!**

Their shouting was so loud the Philistines heard it and they knew the ark had been brought into the Jewish camp.

They knew how the Israelites had been delivered from Egypt under the mighty hand of God!

These folks knew of the power of the God of Israel...and they knew the ark of the covenant had great spiritual significance to the Jewish people, and this made the Philistines afraid because they thought God had come into the Israelite camp!!

But, what the Philistines **didn't** know was that Israel had turned away from God and was clinging to a form of godliness, but they denied the power thereof.

What the Philistines **didn't** know is that the children of Israel recognized the holiness of the ark of the covenant, but they thought the ark itself...the wood and metal box...was their source of power.

The Philistines didn't know that the Israelites were looking at this box as no more than a "good luck charm." The Israelites knew the ark had been very significant to their forefathers...but they didn't have the close relationship with the Lord that their forefathers had. The only power that was associated with the ark of the covenant was the presence of Almighty God! And these folks had long since left Jehovah out of their lives.

It's easy for you and me to do that...We mustn't live in the past...we mustn't rely on the relationship with God that our fathers and mothers have had. We must have our own relationship with God and our fellowship with Him must be renewed day by day.

The Philistines and the Israelites fought another battle...and do you know what happened? Israel was defeated again!! In fact, 30,000 men were killed, the ark of the covenant was taken and Eli's two sons died! Remember last week we saw that God said they would die and they would die on the same day...and they did!!

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Also, **verse 13** tells us that Eli was sitting by the side of the road waiting to get word about the battle and what had happened to the ark of the covenant when a runner came and told him his sons were killed, the battle was lost, 30,000 men were killed and the worst thing...the ark of the covenant was now in enemy hands.

This struck Eli's heart and spirit so severely that he fell off his seat, broke his neck and died, right there on the spot.

Not only that, but the pregnant wife of Phinehas went into labor when she heard the news of her husband's and her father-in-law's death and the capture of the ark and she gave birth to a son and died.

Verse 21...

Now...what went wrong in all this? Hadn't God promised the children of Israel that He would deliver their enemies into their hands? And that He would fight their battles for them? **Why didn't He do that?**

Well, we said last week that the people of Israel were living in the last days of the judges and every man was doing what was right in his own eyes!!

Think about it...

Did God tell the people of Israel to go against the Philistines?

I mean, do you see anywhere in this chapter where the people prayed? Where they repented of and confessed their sins and called on divine direction and power and protection and victory of Almighty God?

NO!! NOWHERE DO WE SEE THAT!!

Then, when Israel suffered the first defeat here in **chapter 4**, they decided, "You know, we might better have the ark of the covenant with us next time. If we have the ark of the covenant with us, surely then, we'll have victory over the Philistines!!"

So...they sent to Shiloh to get their "good luck charm". They still didn't know God's will, did they? They still hadn't gone before the Lord to seek His will...but they believed this box that represented the presence of God would make the difference in victory and defeat.

What the men of Israel had conveniently forgotten is this:

God blessed Israel and fought their battles when they were obedient to Him!

These folks hadn't changed their ways...They were as disobedient here as they were during the time of the **Book of Judges**. "Every man still did what was right in his own eyes." And in the end, every man went to his own tent defeated!

Well, not only did the **Israelites** believe the ark of the covenant was a "good luck charm", the **Philistines** thought it was, as well. So the Philistines captured it but think about it...

If God had still been enthroned over the ark of the covenant, every Philistine who touched it would have dropped dead! In fact, Hophni and Phinehas would have been struck dead long before they died at the hands of the Philistines, wouldn't they?

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God had the right to withdraw His presence anytime He wanted to! And it is obvious God had withdrawn His presence from the ark of the covenant and the people had strayed so far from God spiritually that they didn't even know it!!

These folks were depending on a box instead of God. They put their faith in wood and gold instead of Jehovah! God doesn't reside in a box even though many of us try to put Him into one.

Well, **chapter 5** tells us what happened to the ark in the Philistine city of Ashdod, when they placed it in the house of their god, Dagon. **Our God is a jealous God! He won't be placed beside another god as equal. He is not just another god! There is, in fact, no other God!!**

1 Samuel 5:1-4...

Don't you think God has a sense of humor?

Do you believe these folks thought God would let them get by with this? Was God just going to sit back and let these ungodly Philistines believe their god was greater than the God of Israel?

The next morning when the Philistines came into the temple to love and worship their pagan god Dagon, they saw that Dagon was lying down prostrate before the ark of the covenant. I wonder if they scratched their heads and asked each other, "What on earth happened in here last night? Do you think we had an earthquake...or a big wind?"

So, they set Dagon back up...and the next morning when they went into the temple...there is Dagon, not only lying face down before the ark of the covenant but also his head and his hands were cut off and were lying on the threshold...and only his trunk (stump) remained!! This bothered these folks so much that they never again stepped on the threshold of that temple.

Aren't you glad we don't serve a god that can be reduced to a stump?

I remember the time we went to Japan and we were taken to visit a huge Shinto shrine. All the Shinto workers were so busy cleaning their gods and *cleaning up after* their gods...they even had "most sacred horses." Aren't you glad we serve the God who cleanses us?

The rest of this chapter tells us that God was not at all happy that the sacred ark of the covenant had been taken into this pagan Philistine territory and so He struck these folks with tumors. (NAS – hemorrhoids...but these are not the hemorrhoids that we know about...they were tumors, and they were associated with mice or rats some way...much like the bubonic plague was.)

These tumors were so severe the Philistines in Ashdod decided, "Hey, we don't want this thing around anymore...let's send it off someplace else!"

So, they sent the ark of the covenant to Gath...then they sent it to Ekron...(and I believe from what we see in the next chapter that it may have also been sent on to the cities of Gaza and Ashkelon) and everywhere it went, the young men and the old men came down with tumors. **Verses 11-12...**

Let's just draw a few conclusions before we go on to the next chapter...

1) Many times God uses the enemies of His children to discipline His children.

Could God have enabled the Jews to defeat the Philistines? Of course, He could!
But, the most important thing to God was not for His children to be victorious, but

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for His children to be obedient!! And, God used these pagan, ungodly Philistines to discipline His children.

2) **When God's children are defeated, this doesn't mean God is defeated.**

I believe the Philistines felt very superior after they had defeated the Israelites. I also believe when the world looks at Christians and sees them defeated, they feel superior, as well. God allows defeat to come into **our** lives for the same reason He allowed it to come to His children back then...to teach us something, to strengthen us!

In our society today, it's not that the world is so strong but the church has become too weak!

3) **The God of heaven whom we serve cannot be captured!**

The **children of Israel** thought **they** could do it and the **Philistines** thought **they** could do it! But, we serve the holy and all powerful God who cannot be conquered, controlled or manipulated!

In **chapter 6**, we see that the Philistines had had enough...They wanted to get rid of the ark, but they weren't sure how to do it!!

By the way...the Philistines didn't take steps to send the ark back until God inflicted pain upon them, did they? I mean, they just sort of put the Dagon thing out of their mind, didn't they? But, when God afflicted them with these painful tumors, they decided something must be done. That never happens to us, does it? We always listen to God in the good times, don't we? God never has to use pain and affliction to get our attention, does He?

No, we know that's not so...many times, we don't respond to Biblical truth until we experience pain! God wants us to listen to Him every day...not just when we're hurting!!

Well, they were tired of sending the ark from city to city...so they came up with this plan. They decided they would prepare a gift of gold tumors...five of them and five gold mice...one for each of their five cities and they would put these gold tumors and mice inside the ark. By the way, this was a "guilt offering"...this was simply their way of appeasing their gods...just give them a gift! But, this wasn't the guilt offering God had designed!

Many times, we design our own methods of acknowledging God rather than serving Him the way He requires us to.

Well, if sending a guilt offering of golden tumors and mice wasn't unusual enough, then, they would do something **very** unusual. They would put the ark of the covenant on a new cart and then they would hitch this cart to two cows that had recently given birth and were still nursing their calves.

They decided if the cows returned back home...as cows that had recently given birth and are still nursing would surely have the strong instinct to do...then all the tumors were simply happenstance...

But, if the cows kept going and didn't return home to their calves, then they would know their tumors were from God!!

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I believe we need to mention here that the Philistines acknowledged the existence of the Hebrew God, but only as one of many deities whose favor they sought. If a person thinks of God in this way, then it's very easy for him to ignore God's demand that He alone is to be worshiped, isn't it? Many people "worship" God in this way. They see God simply as one ingredient in a successful life. But God is far more than an ingredient...He is the Source of life itself!

What they were doing was putting God to the test...but they were failing to recognize and acknowledge the awesome power of God in controlling the actions of these cows...

Well, the cows didn't return home...they went straight to a Jewish town called Beth-shemish. The ark was returned to Jewish hands...but the story doesn't end there.

Chapter 6 tells us that the Levites took the cart and split the wood from it and built a fire and offered the cows as a burnt offering. It also tells us they took the ark of the Lord and the box of gold tumors and mice the Philistines had placed in it and they offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the Lord.

Well, that sounds good, doesn't it?

But then **chapter 6** tells us that God struck down over 50,000 men because they had looked into the ark of the covenant!

Why did God do this? Why did God strike these men down, but not the Philistines?

Well, I believe there's a very simple answer to that...God holds us accountable for what we know!! The Philistines didn't know the rules God had laid down about the ark of the covenant. But, the Jewish people did! They knew the Law and they didn't do what the Law said...they did what they wanted to do! ***They were still doing what was right in their own eyes***, weren't they?

The last verse of **chapter 6** tells us the folks of Beth-shemish sent word to the folks at Kiriath-jearim to come get the ark. Instead of confessing specifically what they had done, they just wanted to get the ark out of their city...***they're still doing what was right in their own eyes!***

What is the purpose in all this? Is it just to prove that God is big enough to inflict punishment on those who offend His honor and glory?

Let's just look at three very simple truths of application before we go on to the last chapter.

1) Sheer emotion does not constitute genuine worship.

Were the folks in Bethshemish overjoyed that the ark had come into their city? Yes! They were thrilled! The Bible said they rejoiced! They had a party! They worked themselves up into an emotional high!

They took those two cows and killed them and offered them as a burnt offering unto the Lord and they made other sacrifices unto God...but it was all done in an emotional frenzy and there was no real worship!

Beloved, God says "obedience is better than sacrifice."

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And we all know folks who are caught up in emotion and they're leaving out obedience!!

2) **The holiness of God is a serious matter.**

When these men, however many there were...lifted the lid off the ark of the covenant and looked inside they completely turned their backs on everything they'd ever been taught about the holiness of God. **The ark of the covenant was not a good luck charm...they'd already learned that!**

God said, **"Don't open the box. If you do you're going to die."**

See, the Word of God had been set aside, and the only thing that mattered was the experience of the moment...God is the holy God of Israel and holiness is serious business.

3) **The human heart is deceptive.**

In **chapter 5**, we saw all that happened to the **Philistines** because of the ark of the covenant, and what did they do? Did they repent? Did they get right with God? No! They said, **"Let's just get rid of the box!!"**

Oh, but those are heathen people. I mean, what else would we expect out of the heathen Philistines? They're wicked, ungodly, pagan idol-worshippers...they don't know any better!

But, it's interesting to see that when death and destruction came to the Israelites themselves, the Jews themselves, God's chosen people themselves, that it never occurred to them to repent and get right with God. Their attitude was the same as the attitude as the Philistines... **"Let's get rid of the box!" No repentance...no getting right with God!!**

There ought to be a difference in the way a child of God handles things and the way the world handles things!!

Well, let's look very quickly at **chapter 7** and then, we'll be through...

Finally, in **chapter 7**, we see a ray of hope...

1 Samuel 7:1-2...

After twenty long years, we finally see the children of Israel in sorrow before the Lord.

Verses 3-4...

This is actually the beginning of a great repentance and revival, isn't it? We can never be revived unless we repent. We must get the gods out of our lives. Paul commended the Thessalonians for turning **from** idols **to** serve the living God! It took these folks twenty long years, but they finally did it!

Verses 5-11...

Do you see the difference in this and chapter 4?

God gives His children victory when they are obedient to Him! This was the first victory these folks had seen in a long, long time!

And the reasons they had victory were...

- they had **confessed**
- they had **repented**
- they had **put away their idols**

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- they had **turned back to God**
- they had **realized victory came only from God, and it was predicated on their obedience**
- they **also relied on their spiritual leader, Samuel, to undergird them in prayer.**

Such a difference from **chapter 4!**

Well, let's see one more thing and we'll be through...

Verses 12-14...

How many of you have ever sung the song, **"Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing"**?

The second verse of that song goes like this,

"Here I raise mine Ebenezer; hither by Thy help I'm come; And I hope, by Thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home. Jesus sought me when a stranger, wand'ring from the fold of God; He, to rescue me from danger, interposed His precious blood."

How many of you have sung that song and wondered what in the world it means to raise an Ebenezer? Well, this passage of Scripture we just read tells us!

The word "Ebenezer" means "stone of help". The children of God had finally experienced victory over the Philistines and they raised a stone of memorial to remind them that they didn't do this by themselves...Look again in **verse 12...** "Thus far the LORD has helped us."

Have you ever done that? Have you ever raised any "Ebenezers"? Have you ever looked back over your life and seen that this circumstance or that situation was the place the Lord helped you?

One such "Ebenezer" would be your salvation experience. Do have a day when you know you gave your heart to Jesus? Well, if you don't, why not make it today? If you do, raise an "Ebenezer" there.

Chuck Swindoll calls these "stones of remembrance".

Let me encourage you this afternoon to get alone with God and thank Him for specific times in your life when you know beyond a doubt that His supernatural help was the only thing that got you through! And then raise your stone of help...your stone of remembrance there!!