

FIRST SAMUEL

Chapter 4

The Philistines Capture the Ark

And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. 2 The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. 3 And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, “Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? 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.” 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. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. 5 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. 6 And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, “What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?” And when they learned that the ark of the LORD had come to the camp, 7 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. 8 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. 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.” 10 So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. 11 And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

4:1 *word ... came.* The Word of the Lord is no longer “rare” (3:1) but is proclaimed to all Israel through Samuel’s prophetic ministry. (TLSB)

Ebenezer. “Stone of help,” a different place from that mentioned in 7:12; probably refers to a town near Philistine territory. (TLSB)

4:3 *ark of the covenant.* The throne of God’s gracious presence for His people (Ex 25:10–22) had been associated with military campaigns before this time (Nu 10:35; Jsh 3:14–17; 6:12–21). However, without a clear word from God on the matter, moving the ark from its consecrated place was an act of sacrilege, an invitation not to victory but to defeat. The problem was not so much that the Israelites associated God’s gracious presence with the ark (indeed access to God’s gracious presence was by means of the ark), but that they attempted to manipulate this presence to their own will. (TLSB)

4:8 It appears that the Philistines know something of the history of Israel, but they confuse the story of the exodus by stating that the Egyptians suffered the plagues in the wilderness (and not in Egypt itself), and by attributing more than one god to Israel. (TLSB)

4:9 *slaves ... as they have been.* The Philistines and Israelites had clashed and defeated one another before. Cf Jgs 3:1–4, 31; 13:5; 14:4. (TLSB)

4:10 *to his home.* The soldiers deserted, giving the Philistines a clear victory. (TLSB)

thirty thousand foot soldiers. Seven and a half times as many soldiers as were lost in the first battle. (TLSB)

4:1–11 After suffering a relatively minor defeat, the Israelites decide to bring the ark from Shiloh to the battlefield, only to suffer a catastrophic military defeat and lose the ark to the Philistines. This account stands as a rebuke to us if we believe that God’s gracious presence can be manipulated for our purposes to give us license to do our own sinful will. God calls us to receive Him according to His Word, which directs our hearts in faith and our feet in the paths of righteousness. • Lord, defeat my wayward will, and lead me to walk in Your ways. I praise You for the victory Your Son won at the cross and grave so that I may serve in Your presence. Amen. (TLSB)

The Death of Eli

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. **13** When he arrived, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out. **14** When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, “What is this uproar?” Then the man hurried and came and told Eli. **15** Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set so that he could not see. **16** And the man said to Eli, “I am he who has come from the battle; I fled from the battle today.” And he said, “How did it go, my son?” **17** He who brought the news answered and said, “Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a great defeat among the people. Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured.” **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. He had judged Israel forty years. **19** 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, she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. **20** And about the time of her death the women attending her said to her, “Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son.” But she did not answer or pay attention. **21** 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. **22** And she said, “The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.”

4:12 *his clothes torn and dirt on his head.* A sign of grief and sorrow, here marking the messenger as a bearer of bad news (see 2Sa 1:2; 13:19; 15:32). (CSB)

A messenger from the future king’s (Saul’s) tribe ran 18 mi and arrived in the attire of a mourner. (TLSB)

4:13 *his heart trembled for the ark of God.* Eli had sufficient spiritual sensitivity to be aware of the danger inherent in the sinful and presumptuous act of taking the ark of God into the battle. And he seems to have been even more concerned for the ark than for his sons (see v. 18). (CSB)

4:17 The ordering of the news (and Eli’s reaction to it in v 18) suggests that the loss of the ark was considered by both the messenger and Eli as the greatest tragedy. (TLSB)

4:18 *Eli fell.* Jerome: “Eli also was a holy priest, but ... Eli himself offended God by [showing] too great leniency to his sons; therefore, so far from the righteousness of your bishop being able to deliver you, it is rather to be feared that your wickedness may hurl him from his seat” (NPNF 2 6:294). (TLSB)

he died. The death of Eli marked the end of an era that had begun with the death of Joshua and the elders who served with him (see Jos 24:29, 31). Incapable of restraining Israel or his sons from their wicked ways, and weakened and blinded by age, the old priest is an apt symbol of the flawed age now coming to its tragic close. He is also a striking contrast to the reign of David, which is the main focus of this narrative. (CSB)

heavy. A bit of information that not only helps explain why Eli's fall was fatal but also links his death with the judgment announced earlier: "Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves ... ?" (2:29). (CSB)

Perhaps linked to the judgment in 2:29 ("fattening yourselves"). (TLSB)

He had judged Israel forty years. Eli is here included among the judges (see 2Sa 7:11; Jdg 2:16–19; Ru 1:1), who served as leaders of Israel in the period between the deaths of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and the establishment of kingship. It is likely that Eli's leadership of 40 years overlapped that of Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon (Jdg 12:7–14), as well as that of Samson (Jdg 13–16). (CSB)

Since Eli died at age 98 (v 15), the implication is that he began his vocation as judge at age 58. (TLSB)

4:19 Stress can induce labor. (TLSB)

4:20 *her death.* Fulfillment of God's judgment against Eli and his house (2:27–36; 3:10–14). (TLSB)

4:21 *Ichabod.* Hbr "glory" with a prefix of indeterminate meaning. Name probably means "no glory." (TLSB)

The glory has departed. The real glory of Israel was Israel's God, not the ark as such, and loss of the ark did not mean that God had abandoned his people—God was not inseparably bound to the ark (see Jer 3:16–17). Yet the removal of the ark from Israel did signal estrangement in the relationship between God and his people, and it demonstrated the gravity of their error in thinking that in spite of their wickedness they had the power to coerce God into doing their will simply because they possessed the ark. (CSB)

4:12–22 God's word of judgment is fulfilled in Israel's defeat, the death of Eli's sons, and the capture of the ark. Yet, Eli and his daughter-in-law, after hearing the news, also die. God's word of judgment is fearful and means death to all who have sinned. Our hope lies in His mercy alone, shown in Christ Jesus, our faithful High Priest, who bore God's wrath. • Lord, let not my heart grow fat with self-righteousness, sloth, or indifference. Exercise me in Your life-giving Word. Amen. (TLSB)