

INTRODUCTION

Many people in our world are superstitious, some of our sporting stars go through the same routines believing that they will play well if they do so. Some must wear the same jacket or shoes etc. Even sports fans have lucky mascots and lucky routines. I was told as a child not to walk under a ladder or don't spill salt; for it will bring you bad luck.

Some people carry around with them a lucky rabbit's foot or a charm of some sort, believing that everything will go well with them if they do so. Most of this might seem silly to us because we believe God ordains everything that happens and controls everything but we will see in this chapter what happens when such thinking affects one's belief.

This chapter has more to do with Israel's superstitious belief than with true faith. Israel believed that by having the Ark they would be guaranteed victory. Of course there is some theological thinking behind their belief as we will see but it was faulty theology. In chapters 4-6 the focus moves from Samuel and moves now to the Ark of God. These three chapters are about eliminating the old corrupt leadership in Israel before the focus comes back to the new era and the new godly leadership of Samuel from chapter 7 onwards. The focus in this chapter is the Ark of God, which is mentioned twelve times.

1. ISRAEL'S WRONG THINKING ABOUT GOD (vs. 1-11)

The Philistines were the constant enemy of Israel and it appears that Israel is under threat again (v 1). In some way or other politically, Israel were subject to the Philistines (v 9) and so as the chapter opens with the Israelites growing tired of this Philistine oppression and therefore they decide to attack their enemies in order to finally remove their threat.

Israel camped at Ebenezer and the Philistines set up camp at Aphek, which was 25 miles from Shiloh. Now it seems that the leaders of Israel had not consulted the Lord about this battle for they simply assumed that the Lord would give them the victory after all they were God's chosen people and his reputation was at stake. The result was a shock and a wakeup call to the Israelites for they were defeated and lost 4000 soldiers who were killed (v 2).

This rightly caused some questioning within the Israelite camp; how could they explain this unexpected defeat for they expected to win the battle but instead they were humiliated. They rightly understood that it was the Lord who brought this defeat about (v 3) for they knew that He was sovereign and in control of all that happened.

Now it is good to ask this sort of question after we have faced a spiritual defeat or whenever something has happened in our life that appears to be a defeat for us. God does control everything so it is right to ask why; when things don't go as we had planned or hoped and in fact had turned out disastrously for us. They asked the right question but they came up with the wrong answer.

They should have realised their sin and repented and turned back to God but the only answer they could come up with was that the Ark of God was not with them in the battle and therefore perhaps God was displeased with them because of this and brought about their defeat. They were conditioned to think in external ways it never dawned on them that defeat may be because of their poor spiritual condition before God.

No doubt they argued that God had given them victories in the past when the Ark was present (Numbers 10:33) and therefore the Ark must be the missing ingredient.

They never thought that they never once consulted the Lord about this battle, perhaps this was not the Lord's will or strategy but they were so intent on defeating the Philistines that they simply sent for the Ark and assumed that the very presence of the Ark would mean that it would go well with them and that they would be victorious (v 3). They were simply being superstitious rather than spiritual they believed the Ark guaranteed their victory no matter what spiritual condition they might be in.

Now when the Ark was brought from Shiloh into the camp the people became very excited because now they were expecting an easy victory (v 5). They superstitiously believed that victory was assured now because they had the Ark. It seemed that victory was just a matter of time especially as we are told when the Philistines heard about that all the excitement in the Israelite camp and that the Ark of God was now present with Israel.

Their response was one of fear (v 7); for they knew that they were in trouble for they knew that the Ark represented the presence of God and therefore they knew they had to fight against Israel's God as well as Israel's people. The Philistines knew that in the past God had granted Israel victory over the might of the Egyptians (v 8) so how could they resist such a powerful God.

Nevertheless they encouraged one another in a sort of do or die attitude and encouraged themselves to be strong and to be men and fight for they knew what was at stake, subjection to Israel (v 9). The next day fighting was resumed and Israel was once again defeated with the loss of 30,000 foot soldiers, it was a complete slaughter (v 10). On top of this defeat the Philistines captured the Ark of God and the priests Hophni and Phinehas were killed (v 11). It was a total disaster never in all the history of Israel had such a thing happened and now what about the future of Israel; its political situation was precarious at best.

Now what does all this teach us? It teaches us how important it is to think correctly about God and our relationship with him. The people of Israel were wrong in their thinking; they assumed God was with them but in fact He was against them; He actually gave the Philistines the victory (v 3).

After their first defeat they asked the right question but came up with the wrong answer. They should have remembered the warnings of Scripture (Leviticus 26:14 & 17 and Deuteronomy 28:15 & 25), which taught them that a failure to listen and obey God would lead to disaster.

Perhaps if they had of learnt that lesson after their first defeat and repented of their sins then things may have been different second time around but instead of repenting they pressed on and based their hope on a wrong belief. They believed that the Ark would guarantee their success in battle. Now the Ark of the Covenant as it was known was a gold covered portable box 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ feet long by 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ feet wide and high.

It was to be housed behind the veil in the tabernacle in the area called the Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies (Exodus 24:10-22). It was only to be moved when God had instructed the nation to move; like their time in the wilderness. But now that Israel was settled in the land it was to be housed in the tabernacle.

The Ark symbolised for Israel that God was the ruler of his people; the Ark contained the 10 commandments which symbolised the fact that God has given his word to the people and on the lid of the Ark blood was sprinkled yearly on the Day of Atonement which symbolised God's willingness to forgive and the need for atonement. The Ark symbolised that God rules over his people, gave his word to them and offered them forgiveness through atonement.

During their wilderness wanderings the Ark was a symbol of the Lord leading his people into battle against their enemies (Numbers 10:35). With all this history and truth; then Israel thought all they

had to do was to have the Ark with them in battle to be assured of victory but they did not listen to the Lord or obey him they did not concern themselves with their spiritual well being instead they used the Ark like a superstitious charm.

But the Ark was not only being used like a lucky charm but what Israel is doing is trying to manipulate God their assumption is that as the Ark symbolises God's presence with his people then He will be forced to deliver Israel in battle in order to guard his reputation. You see to be defeated with the Ark present would dishonour God's name and mock him before his enemies and God would not allow that to happen or so they thought.

They are pressurising God into acting on their behalf they are twisting his arm for if God does not act his reputation will go down the tubes especially among the pagan nations. That my dear friend is what many Christians and Christian churches do today as well and such an approach has more to do with superstition than it has to do with faith. Do Churches and Christians not try to control God rather than seeking him?

Often it is our desire for success that moves us in this direction rather than a desire for knowing God and submitting to him. Let me give you a couple of examples. It is possible for a church to hold a high profile mission in a town. They talk it up, they call upon people to come and even claim that God is going to work in ways not seen in the town before.

Perhaps they have a high profile preacher whom God has used in the past and therefore the assumption is that by having him to preach God must surely bless. It could be that the church is encouraged to hold days of prayer and fasting as well as all night prayer meetings. The expectation is that God will work in salvation but it is more than that; there is an assumption that God has to work through this mission otherwise his reputation will be damaged.

It's almost as if God is being put under pressure everyone in the town knows what is happening and everyone sees the excitement and the expectation on the faces of the church members. They know the work that has gone in and the prayers that have been said and they know of the reputation of the preacher. Now there is nothing wrong with what I have said apart from the assumption that God will work or has to work.

We must pray for his Spirit to work in and through such a mission and we must have faith to believe that He is able to work through such a mission. But no one can claim that He will work. You see there is every possibility that such a mission is run in order to bolster the church's reputation rather than God's honour. It could be that people in that church never thought about the spiritual state of the church or even the need to repent.

Perhaps the leaders never prayed about the possibility of a mission, perhaps they just planned it and assumed God would bless. That is why I believe that a Mission, which is obviously a good thing, must be prayed about long before any initiative is planned. It must be determined that this is God's will and not our idea. We must never do anything that appears to put God under pressure to act for in doing so we are acting superstitiously rather than by faith. Do we assume that because in a few weeks we will organise a Family Treasure Hunt that God must bring people to it and must act to save some. God does not have to do any such thing, He is not under pressure to act at all but I trust that our Family Treasure Hunt is about seeking to bring God's word to people so that God will be honoured.

I trust that our motives are right when we go out on the doors and that we are not trying to twist God's arm into action by doing so. I trust that we search our own hearts regularly and repent of our sins before we attempt anything in God's name.

Likewise as individuals we can have this mind set when it comes to prayer. We believe prayer changes things and rightly so, so we pray because we want things to change. But prayer is surely about much more than we want things to change for prayer is about being in a relationship with God and prayer is a vital part of developing that relationship.

We may only want things to change for our own benefit for life would be made easily if God did answer our prayer; but in reality prayer is about bringing glory to God. You see things staying exactly as they are now may glorify God. In the same way we may think that by having a daily devotional time things will go better for us. We may forget to read the Bible one morning and feel on the way to work that things are going to go disastrously that day. But if that is how we think then we are superstitious rather than people of faith.

We ought to have daily devotions not because things may go better for us but because we want God to speak to us and we want to speak to our God. It's about relationship rather than about getting God to act for us. It is so easy to stop worshipping God because He is worthy and to worship him because He is useful and the difference is often very subtle. That is the main lesson from these first 11 verses.

But there is a second lesson that we want to draw from these verses and it's a lesson that we will come back to next time. The lesson is that although it appears that God was not present in the battle He actually was present; but his presence was not one of blessing but one of judgement. In verse 11 we are told that the sons of Eli were killed. That as I have already said was in fulfilment of God's word (2:34).

In acting in this way God is showing Israel the real problem with the nation and the reason for their defeat. The problem was sin and in particular the sin within the leadership of Israel. They treated God with contempt and no one treats God with contempt and gets away with it. It is a solemn lesson that needs to be learnt. God cannot be trifled with we cannot manipulate God or use him for our own purposes.

Sin must be dealt with and if we don't deal with it God will. Now this is a lesson that the church needs to learn. All of our spiritual activity is meaningless unless sin is being dealt with. It is possible for churches to have much activity going on and yet be failing to deal with sin within the camp. It is possible for Pastors to be preaching courageously and yet not be dealing with sin in his own life.

Perhaps one reason why churches including our own see so little in the way of God working and bringing glory to his name in salvation is that we do not take sin seriously or deal with it effectively. We play around with it and somehow expect God to be with us to bless. O God is with us but sadly He is with us to judge and deal with sin because of our own reluctance to do so.

However in dealing with sin in his church God is bringing honour to himself and bringing glory to his name. Sometimes He allows dishonour to come upon his name among unbelievers like allowing Israel to be defeated in this chapter in order to bring honour to himself by cleansing his people and making his church pure.

Sometimes God allows dishonour to be brought to his name in a local community through a church scandal in order to deal with the scandal and thereby bring glory to his name through purifying his church.

As we close let us search our hearts and minds concerning why we long for God to bless and let us be serious with sin and root it out of our lives and out of the life of this church so that glory will be brought to His great name and people will talk about God being among his people for the right reasons.

May God help us to heed these lessons?

Amen