

FIRST SAMUEL

Chapter 4

The Philistines Capture the Ark

And Samuel's word came to all Israel Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek. ² The Philistines deployed their forces to meet Israel, and as the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand of them on the battlefield. ³ When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, "Why did the LORD bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the LORD's covenant from Shiloh, so that it may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies." ⁴ So the people sent men to Shiloh, and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim. And Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. ⁵ When the ark of the LORD's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. ⁶ Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, "What's all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?" When they learned that the ark of the LORD had come into the camp, ⁷ the Philistines were afraid. "A god has come into the camp," they said. "We're in trouble! Nothing like this has happened before. ⁸ Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the desert. ⁹ Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!" ¹⁰ So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. ¹¹ The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, 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)

Death of Eli

¹² That same day a Benjamite ran from the battle line and went to Shiloh, his clothes torn and dust on his head. ¹³ When he arrived, there was Eli sitting on his chair by the side of the road, watching, because his heart feared for the ark of God. When the man entered the town and told what had happened, the whole town sent up a cry. ¹⁴ Eli heard the outcry and asked, “What is the meaning of this uproar?” The man hurried over to Eli, ¹⁵ who was ninety-eight years old and whose eyes were set so that he could not see. ¹⁶ He told Eli, “I have just come from the battle line; I fled from it this very day.” Eli asked, “What happened, my son?” ¹⁷ The man who brought the news replied, “Israel fled before the Philistines, and the army has suffered heavy losses. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured.” ¹⁸ When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backward off his chair by the side of the gate. His neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man and heavy. He had led Israel forty years. ¹⁹ His daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant and near the time of delivery. When she heard the news that the ark of God had been captured and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she went into labor and gave birth, but was overcome by her labor pains. ²⁰ As she was dying, the women attending her said, “Don’t despair; you have given birth to a son.” But she did not respond or pay any attention. ²¹ She named the boy Ichabod, saying, “The glory has departed from Israel”—because of the capture of the ark of God and the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband. ²² She said, “The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.”

4:12 *his clothes torn and dust 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 feared 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).

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 led Israel forty years. See NIV text note. 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).

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.

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)