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1 Samuel 4:1-22

Eighth Message

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WHEN THE UNTHINKABLE HAPPENS!

SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES

Today we begin the second act of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. In the first act (1 Sam 1-3) the narrator relates the story of the crossing fates of Eli and Samuel; in the second act (1 Sam 4-7), we have the crossing of the ark of the covenant, as it is unlawfully seized and carted away as a trophy into gentile territory. This second act is framed by two stories of war, with the amazing adventures of the Ark of the Covenant in between. Peter Leithart sets forth the sequence of stories in a chiasmic structure of seven scenes.¹

- a Battle of Aphek (Philistine victory), 4:1b-11
- b Ark captured and exiled, 4:12-22
- c Ark in Philistia (plagues), 5:1-12
- x **Return of the Ark, 6:1-18**
- c' Ark in Beth-shemesh (plague), 6:19-21
- b' Ark exiled in Kiriath-jearim, 7:1-2
- a' Battle of Ebenezer (Israelite victory), 7:3-17

These stories are dramatic and poignant, and yet so tantalizing and humorous that they would captivate even today's over-stimulated teenagers. If Hollywood had a clue they could have produced a much superior film than the fanciful "Raiders of the Lost the Ark." This text could have been the subject for a documentary film entitled "The Victims of the Lost Ark." The riveting action, unpredictable plot and unexpected reversals would have shaped its audiences with profound theology unto godliness. In this mysterious circle tour among the Philistines we learn how God glorifies his name among the gentiles when his people fail to protect his honor. On another level these chapters become a type of world history. Great truths indeed. Yet I wonder if any of you parents have ever read these texts to your children. Have you ever read them yourselves?

Today we will examine the first two scenes, the battle at Aphek, and the capture of the ark by the Philistines. I've entitled our text, "When the Unthinkable Happens!" This is not when bad things happen to good people, but rather when the consequences of habitual sin come home to roost and our universe is dismantled. The focus of our text centers around the life of one man, the old priest Eli. In chapter 2, an anonymous man of God gives him an oracle of doom. Because Eli honored his sons more than God, both sons would die on one day. In chapter 3, our expectations are intensified when we learn that the news of the event "will make everyone's ears tingle." Now in chapter 4, the dreaded events come to pass, with the defeat of the Israeli army, the death of Eli's sons, and the capture of the ark of God by the Philistine army.

The text is divided into two parts: the first half (vv. 1-11), which takes place on the battlefield, documents Israel's two defeats, which were the result of trusting in phony theology; while the second half (vv.12-22) takes place in the city, where we hear three agonizing cries in response to the news: the first by the people, the second by Eli the priest, and the third and most poignant by Eli's daughter-in-law. Her cry, the final word of the chapter, gives voice to the theology of disaster.

I. On the Battlefield: Twin defeats sustained by phony theology (1 Sam 4:1-11)

A. The first round of war: Israel defeated

Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek. 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. (1 Sam 4:1b-2 TNIV)

The Philistines were among the powerful Sea Peoples who came to Canaan on ships through the Aegean basin, or overland through Anatolia, at the end of the 13th century B.C. They settled in the southwest corner of Palestine, in a confederation of five city-states: Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron and Gath, with Gaza becoming the leading power among them. Technologically, they were one of most advanced peoples in the Near East. Archaeological discoveries have shown that they were able to adapt to new environments. They were extremely innovative, combining influences of various cultures in their pottery and art. "For the next 150 years, until about 1000 B.C.E., the Philistine confederation was the most powerful entity in this corner of the world...The source of Philistine power was apparently in the jealously defended monopoly of iron wares and the art of forging iron (1 Sam 13:19-21)." They allowed Israel to use iron for purposes of peace, as in agricultural instruments (so that they could confiscate Israel's crops), but not for military purposes.

The scene opens with the Israelites taking the initiative to engage the Philistines in battle. The fact that there is now a formidable prophet in Israel, and no mention of any prophetic sanction for this war, should give us pause. The two armies prepare for engagement in opposing camps, the Israelites in Ebenezer, the Philistines in Aphek. From a military point of view, Aphek was a strategic stronghold. Situated at the headwaters of the Yarkon River, it forced the traffic on the main highway running along the Mediterranean coast through a narrow funnel between the river and the mountains. Ebenezer ("stone of help") forms an inclusio for the act. However, as Fokkelman observes, it was not given this name until 20 years later, when Samuel finally secures victory, but the narrator uses it here to show us that the Israelites "expect help from God and see nothing of it during the first round."³

Though Israel is initially confident, the battle quickly goes from bad to worse. It seems as if the disciplined Philistine army's first strike caught Israel's troops unprepared (there is no mention of her counter-deployment) and disorganized, with no ability to mount any resistance. With a huge body count strewn across the battlefield it was deplorable defeat against a pagan people.

B. Israel's leaders regroup and strengthen themselves

When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, "Why did the LORD bring defeat on us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the LORD's covenant from Shiloh, so that he may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies." 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. When the ark of the LORD's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. (4:3-5)

When the shamed soldiers return to camp, Israel's infamous elders take up their theological mantle to discern the cause of the humiliating defeat. The sensitive reader doesn't invest a lot of hope in the outcome of this "elders' meeting." The last time they gave voice to their collective wisdom it was their heinous proposal of abduction to provide wives for the decimated tribe of Benjamin (Judg 21:20-22).

The elders' "why" reveals their indignation at God, knowing that he was capable of defeating their enemies but failed to do so. Blaming him for their defeat, they fail to deal with the root cause of their failure, which was their sin. Without reflection, confession or prayer they impulsively shift into a "fix it" mode. They propose a solution that profoundly involves God, without seeking his opinion, let alone his permission. Hastily pulling a few verses out of context, they believe they can recreate the circumstances of holy war in Joshua's day, where the ark was prominent in the defeat of Jericho (Josh 6:1-21). Robert Alter's translation, "let us take *to us*...the ark," with its inclusion of "the superfluous personal pronoun suggests how the elders arrogate to themselves a sacred object for their own purposes, conceiving the Ark magically...as a vehicle of power they can manipulate for their own purposes."⁴ And the verb "take" reminds us of the way Hophni and Phinehas desecrated Israel's holy offerings. In 1 Samuel 2:14-16, the verb was used four times to describe how they "took" from God whatever they desired. If worshippers did not cooperate, they "took" it by force, mafia-style. Now that verb is used with "the ark of covenant of the Lord of Hosts, who is enthroned above the cherubim" as its object!

The ark was the symbol of God's throne on earth, mediating the presence of his might. Their hope was that the God of armies would send his angels to fight for them, but they refuse to reflect on what "covenant" entails. Inside the ark were the Ten Commandments, representing God's moral will, signifying that his rule on earth was manifest supremely by holy relationships, not magic or manipulation. By calling attention to God's name and their covenant obligations they condemn themselves.

With no deliberation or objection to these manipulative gyrations, messengers are sent to retrieve the ark from Shiloh and bring it into battle. Ominously, the names of Eli's two condemned sons are mentioned at the end of the verse (in Hebrew). But any fears are forgotten as soon as the ark enters Israel's camp and the people shout with such force that the earth shakes. Sadly, it's a man-made earthquake of empty enthusiasm. Blinded by the self-serving theology of their leaders, they truly believe Jericho's victory "shout" (Josh 6:20) will bring down the Philistine walls of strength.

C. The Philistines re-group and strengthen themselves

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, the Philistines were afraid. "A god has come into the camp," they said. "Woe to us! Nothing like this has happened before. 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 wilderness. Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!" (4:6-9)

Hearing the shout from across the valley, the Philistines recognize that the ark of the Lord has come into the camp. The irony is that the uncircumcised Philistines show greater spiritual discernment and proper emotion ("fear") to the ark than God's people. Though they are idol worshippers, they at least stop and consider the deeper significance of the ark. As a result they grow in their theology. Israel on the other hand

desecrates the revelation they've been given by misinterpreting their sacred history. The Philistines, even though their reading of history is not completely accurate (the plagues occurred in Egypt, not the wilderness), acknowledge that Israel's God is in a league all by himself. It doesn't take a genius to know that the plagues he unleashed upon Egypt, the greatest nation in the Near East, were an unprecedented display of power and might. Filled with terror and dread, they realize that apart from an absolute miracle they are doomed to defeat and subsequent slavery.

With their gods outmatched they draw on the only resources they have left: "Be strong...be men...be men and fight! The verb "be strong" (*chazaq*) was used several times in Exodus to describe the Lord "hardening" Pharaoh's heart against Israel in order to display his glory by decimating the Egyptian gods (Exod 4:21). Here the Philistines do God's work for him and harden themselves without God's help. Their speech resembles a coach's fiery half-time tirade to his beleaguered team: "We can do it, we can do it! We can, we can! You need to dig deep and believe in yourselves! This is the whole season, everything we've worked for. You can accomplish any dream you want if you'll just have enough faith in yourselves. So go out there, hold your heads up high and fight like men!"

Now if you were a Bible believing right wing political conservative, and your team had the ark, and the enemy's god was self-reliance, you would have had no doubt that God was on your side and victory was assured. Unfortunately, things are never as black and white as we would like. On this day God was not about to side with either team.

D. The second round of war: Israel defeated and the ark taken

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. The ark of God was captured (lit. "taken"), and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died (the Hebrew word order: "and the two sons of Eli died, Hophni and Phinehas."). (4:10-11)

Armed with the god of self-reliance, the Philistine army annihilates the Israelites. The human loss is more than seven times the previous battle. The narrator chooses his words carefully so that we cannot miss the theological overtones behind the battle. The term "slaughter" (*makkah*) is the same word used for "plague" in v. 8; the verb "defeated" (*nagaph*) is a term that is most often used in Exodus for God "striking" the Egyptians with devastating plagues. God has changed his team jersey. Talk about a reversal (Deut 28:25)!

After we recover from this initial shock, two more blows await us. The ark is "taken" into pagan custody, and Eli's two sons are killed. Once again those dreaded names, Hophni and Phinehas, are the last words we hear. From the narrator's viewpoint, self-reliance did not gain the Philistine victory, for there was no victory for anyone that day, only defeat. And the real cause of Israel's defeat was the high-handed sin of the priesthood that had infected the entire nation, just as Achan's sin brought defeat to Israel in the battle of Ai.

II. In the City: Three reactions to the tragedy (1 Sam 4:12-22)

After the report of Israel's annihilation in battle, the narrator takes us inside the city of Shiloh to hear the impact of the news on the waiting community. The pain of the tragedy is expressed three times, with increasing intensity, first by the city (vv.12-13), then by the priest Eli (vv. 14-18), and finally Eli's daughter-in-law (vv. 19-22), who, like Hannah, will have the final word in the story.

That same day a Benjamite ran from the battle line and went to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dust on his head. When he arrived, there was Eli sitting on his chair (lit. "throne") 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. Eli heard the outcry and asked, “What is the meaning of this uproar?” The man hurried over to Eli, who was ninety-eight years old and whose eyes had failed so that he could not see. He told Eli, “I have just come from the battle line; I fled from it this very day.” Eli asked, “What happened, my son?” The one 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.” 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 he was heavy. He had led (lit. “judged”) Israel forty years. (4:12-18)

A. The city cries out (vv. 12-13)

As the city waits anxiously for the news, an unnamed man from Benjamin appears on the horizon, running toward the city. His torn clothes and disheveled appearance tell the whole story: he is a shell-shocked soldier, one of only a few to survive the massacre. As he enters the city this bearer of bad news comes face to face with the last person he wants to see, Eli, the father of Hophni and Phinehas. Having the responsibility of telling a parent that his son or daughter has been tragically killed is a grievous task. Seeing the anxiety written all over this Eli’s face, the soldier can’t bring himself to speak the truth; he runs past the priest into the city. Once he is inside the news spreads like wildfire and the townspeople let out a painful, blood-curling cry.

B. Eli falls backward to his death (vv. 14-18)

The ominous cry from the city captures Eli’s attention and he seeks to know its significance. There is now no possibility of the soldier from Benjamin putting off his dreadful task any longer. Yet the narrator manages to postpone Eli’s reaction one last time, giving the reader pause, with two more details about the priest: Eli is old, really old, and blind. This last detail tells us how the runner from the battle was able to avoid his encounter with the priest, but on a deeper level, it speaks volumes about Eli’s spiritual condition. Despite four decades as Israel’s spiritual leader, he ends his lengthy career spiritually blind.

Desiring to shield the fragile priest from the shock of swallowing his poison in one gulp, the man nervously stumbles over his words, disclosing as little as possible. Alter translates it as, “*I am the one who has come from the lines, I from the lines fled today*” (v. 16). With so little information, Eli has to probe further to find out what he does not want to hear: “What happened, *my son?*” “The report now moves from a general description of defeat, to the admission of a rout, to the death of Eli’s two sons, and, finally, to what is assumed to be the worst catastrophe, the capture of the Ark.”⁵ As Fokkelman writes, “Step by step the man takes Eli into the abyss.”⁶

Eli’s response to the report of the ark’s capture is “theatrically stunning” (Bodner). The mention of the ark sends a shock wave through his body, which, being of considerable weight (*kavod* - “weight,” “glory”), catapults him backwards with such velocity that it breaks his neck. It is a gruesome scene.

The narrator’s concluding word on Eli’s reign of forty years is significant. It seals the story of his life with the gruesome image of death. With Eli, death is the last word. You might think it cruel of the narrator to draw out the shameful spectacle for so long. Eli is old, frail, and on the verge of collapse, yet he is forced into the role of a blind investigator to search out the truth. In so doing he will be unmasking his worst fears which, once exposed, will kill him. If that is not bad enough, our final memory of Israel’s high priest are the two images of his blindness and obesity. After all, who makes fun of a blind or an obese man, especially at his funeral?

The reason is to teach us that these two things are related. Eli was blind because he was obese. His life is a testimony to the terrible price of sensuality. Sometime during his priesthood he began feeding off the fruits of the sins of his sons, and the taste was sweet. Like Isaac, who loved Esau “for the game in his mouth,” so Eli’s loved his boys because they fed his sensual appetites. To perpetuate such luxuries he therefore had to turn a blind eye to their sins, which meant abdicating his oversight of all that went on in Shiloh. He became a perfunctory priest and a blind guide. This explains why, when the most sacred communion between Hannah and the Lord took place in front of him, he could not see it or appreciate it. Instead he accused Hannah of being a lifetime drunk. Sensuality blinds us to the glorious visitations of God that happen all around us among the poor and the humble. On the other hand, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt 5:8).

With their father abdicating his responsibilities the sons become more daring, aggressive and violent, preying not only the worshippers but also upon the sexual purity of the young virgins. Yet Eli persists in his denial and so loses the capacity to feel the damning horror of sin. Eventually his blindness removes him so far from reality he has to discover the dark truth about his boys by reading their sordid stories in the tabloids. When the whole world is talking about your family, you can’t stay in denial, you have to say something. So Eli calls a press conference to condemn the sin of his boys, but when his massive body has to be rolled out to the podium on a cart, his words have no weight. You can only hide your sensuality for so long.

Eventually the sins of the sons caused all Israel to despise religion. The Lord was losing access to the people he loved. With his patience stretched beyond the breaking point he was forced to pronounce an oracle of irrevocable destruction. But Eli continues performing his religious duties as if God had said nothing. Sin can so immobilize us that not even the threat of hell can stir us. The world is about to be dismantled, yet the alcoholic asks for another drink. It is not until the day when Israel goes to battle and the body count is unbearable that a blind Eli finally begins to see the horror of what he has done. If it was the phony theology of the elders that got a lot of people killed, Eli bears the ultimate responsibility. He forsook his office of teaching the Torah to the people. You can’t place the ultimate blame for the deplorable morality of our nation on the politicians; you must lay it at the feet of the pastors.

The moment before Eli dies, the blind priest is allowed to see his legacy in full color: a decimated nation, two dead sons, and God’s holy throne held hostage. But there are no goodbye speeches or last words by Israel’s pope. The only sound we hear is a thunderous crash as he falls *backwards* off his throne. Fokkelman captures the divine justice of the scene:

Hannah had spoken in her poem (2:18) how the poor could “sit on a seat of honor” (*kavod*). But here Eli’s *kavod* ironically is not honor, but weight. Being gloriously fat, he falls off his throne, backwards and dies! Because of his vast weight (stealing God’s glory) he is being made light of (*qalal*).⁷

May the tombstone of this fallen priest forever frighten us with the terrible cost of compromise.

C. Eli’s daughter-in-law gives voice to the true theology

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. 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. 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 hus-

band. She said, “The Glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.” (4:19-22)

The narrator shifts our attention from death to life and the birth of a child by Phinehas’s wife. Normally a birth announcement injects rays of hope for a new future even in the darkest of times of war. But just as the Philistines cried out earlier in the day, “Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before!” so this day was unprecedented in the history of Israel. When Phinehas’s wife receives the news that the ark has been taken and that she is a widow, she doubles over with labor pains so severe they threaten her life. As she lies dying, her attending nurse tries to dampen her despair with the good news that she has given birth to a son. But nothing on earth can salve the searing wounds of this day. In her exhausted and dying condition “she inscribes the national catastrophe in her son’s name,”⁸ Ichabod, meaning, “Where is glory?” Fokkelman lauds such rare courage:

The woman has an eye only for the profoundest significance of the situation in which the nation finds itself today, formulates it perfectly and has the presence of mind and the courage to immortalize that definition in the giving of a name. Her personal distress or death are not important and neither is her motherhood even. She uses the birth as a vehicle for transmitting one powerful signal: “Ichabod”.⁹

The repetition of the name’s significance, “The Glory has *departed* (*gala* - “uncover, reveal; be/go away into exile”) from Israel,” captures our attention. The first is given by the narrator, the second by the woman. The narrator attributes her lament to the death of her husband, her father-in-law, and the seizure of the ark. When we hear her direct speech, she omits the names of the two dead men. She has purged their names out her sorrow. When the “glory of God departs” our very existence is gutted of everything that is substantial and weighty. No matter what you place into that void, whether a son, a husband, a prestigious career, a night with Oprah, or winning the Nobel Prize, if God is not part of the equation it is all a vapor.

Perhaps it is because women are more acutely attuned to relational pain that the female voice once again stamps the story with its true theology. Like Hannah at the end of the first act, Phinehas’s wife has the last word, not to mention the silence after. Living in a family where no man ever had the courage to expose the truth and confront the evil that desecrated the sanctuary, with her dying breath she places the naked truth in stone: Ichabod.

“Where is Glory?”

It’s a horrifying thought to think that God would allow himself to be taken into exile, yet this would not be the last time. In 586 B.C. it happened on a larger scale. Phinehas’s widow’s message, “Where is Glory?” is again voiced by the prophet Jeremiah in his poignant lament of Lamentations. And when God finally came home and the fullness of his glory dwelt in bodily form, once again unclean hands took him, flogged him, beat him, spit in his face, mocked him, and crucified him. This time the cry was his: “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Matt 27:46), and yet none of the disciples (except John) were there to hear it. They had all fled in fear. It was the women who remained true to history’s darkest hour. They became the first witnesses to the glory of cross. It is because Jesus Christ was willing to be exiled in hell itself that Paul can triumphantly say,

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;

we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:35-39)

And so I ask you, “Where is Glory?”

1 Peter J. Leithart, *A Son to Me, An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2003), 52.

2 H. J. Katzenstein, “Philistines,” ABD, 5:326.

3 J. P. Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Assen: Van Corcum, 1993), 198.

4 Robert Alter, *The David Story, A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 22.

5 Alter, *The David Story*, 24-25.

6 Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 217.

7 Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 215.

8 Alter, *The David Story*, 25.

9 Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 229-230.