

1 Samuel 4:1-22 // Raiders of the Lost Ark??

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[0 : 00] George, thanks for reading that for us. If you could keep your Bibles open at page 274 of the church Bibles, that would be a great help as we look at that portion together.

I don't know what you thought of that. Perhaps you thought it was an unusual choice this morning for a Bible reading at a baptism. We had Amy's baptism, and I understand Amy, the name Amy, means beloved.

And in our chapter, we saw another baby being born, and his name, Ichabod, means where is the glory? Because the glory had gone. So a bit like if we'd baptised a child this morning, where is the love?

Because God's love had left us. But the reason we're in chapter 4 is because last week we were in chapter 3, and the week before we were in chapter 2, and we're committed as a church to working through books of the Bible so that God sets the agenda, and we trust that his word is always helpful and profitable for us.

So let's pray and ask for his help as we turn to this sad but important account. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, God of power and glory, we thank you for the gift of your word.

[1 : 08] Speak to us now, we pray. And whether we're visiting this morning or have been many times before, we ask, would you grant us ears to hear your voice, minds to understand, and hearts that are willing to change and respond rightly to you.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Lots of people like the idea of angels. The Robbie Williams documentary on Netflix at the moment talks about how a breakthrough moment for him, he was actually very glomerful.

He'd left, take that. He felt no one likes him. And he wrote Angels, and it was this global mega hit. And I remember at university at the time with friends who had nothing to do with God, but singing heartily the song Angels to let in the new millennium on New Year's Eve 1999.

And the words from Robbie Williams about this angel that he loves, and through it all, she offers me protection, a lot of love and affection, whether I'm right or wrong. And when I'm feeling weak, I look above, and I know I'll always be blessed with love.

Well, we like that idea, don't we? We love the idea. You can see the attraction of a powerful supernatural being who demands no change from us, who affirms us in all the choices we make, and who is using their power for our good behind the scenes.

[2 : 30] And they want nothing in return. What a great idea. It's a bit like the reason lots of people like Christmas. Even people who don't have a lot to do with God the rest of the year, many people are not really too offended by the idea of a nativity service at school or a crib scene around and about the place at Christmas.

Why? Well, we like that kind of a saviour. He's powerful, sent from heaven, but he's a baby. And we're not threatened by a baby. You can kind of control a baby.

Just keep him in the manger. So it's natural for us to have the same approach to our religion, to our thoughts of God. We'd love the benefits of having the power of God on our side, but without any real interference.

We want to stay in control. Now, what's all this got to do with the events of 1 Samuel 4? Well, we're catching up with the Old Testament people of God at a time when they were living in the land that God had promised them, Canaan, and he'd given to them.

He'd rescued them, and he'd led them into the promised land. And they were ruled by a series of leaders called judges. The judge at the time of 1 Samuel 4 was a man called Eli, and the hub of religious life in the promised land was a place called Shiloh.

[3 : 47] At Shiloh was the tabernacle, which was seen to be God's home, the tent of meeting, where people went to bring their offerings to God. But Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, we already know from earlier chapters, a couple of weeks ago, they were scandalously corrupt.

They used to go and steal the meat from the sacrifices to roast it for themselves before they could make the sacrifices. And they also used to sleep with the women who were there to serve in the temple.

And Eli was told twice in previous chapters by God, by prophets from God, that his family, his house, is under the judgment of God. And though it might all seem a long time ago and far, far away from us, these bleak events in our chapter this morning show us three things about God that each of us urgently needs to see.

And the first is the power of God who can't be fooled. In verses 1 to 11, the power of God who can't be fooled. You can see an outline in the naughty sheet. You can find that helpful. The power of God who can't be fooled.

God's people are under threat from the Philistines. Sometimes they're an enemy nation who wanted to conquer them. And in verse 2, they went out to fight them and they experienced defeat. 4,000 Israelites killed on the battlefield.

[5 : 05] And the leaders of Israel asked the right question in verse 3. If you have a look there. When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, why did the Lord bring defeat on us today before the Philistines?

Now that is a great question. It's a question that acknowledges God is powerful. This could only have happened because our God has allowed it to happen. Why?

And they should have known the answer because God has set out terms in which these people are to relate to him in the promised land. And he made very clear in Leviticus chapter 28 and Deuteronomy, Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 that if the people became unfaithful to him, he would hand them over to their enemies.

So evidently, when they lose a battle like this, the people need to repent. They need to turn back to God. To turn away from the sinful direction of their lives and say, we were wrong.

The Lord is king. So that the blessing of relationship with God could be restored and they could sleep under the blanket of his protection, his powerful protection. Instead, the people have a different tactic.

[6 : 20] Instead of repentance, they want to stay in control but they know they need God's power. So look with me at verse 4. So the people sent men to Shiloh and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the Lord Almighty who was enthroned between the cherubim and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

Now when we hear about the ark, if we're old enough, we think, Indiana Jones, I've got this. But Raiders of the Lost Ark is almost no help to us in understanding what's going on here.

The ark was a wooden box about four feet wide, two and a half feet deep and high and it was overlaid with gold and when the people see the ark, when we see the ark in the Bible, we're to think about three things.

The first is king. The Lord is king. You see how it was described? The Lord Almighty is enthroned above the cherubim. So the ark had these two models of powerful warrior angels or cherubim on top and God was said to be on his throne above them.

When we see the ark, God is king. Then the ark makes us think of covenant. It was the ark of the covenant and if you were to take off the lid of the ark and look inside, you'd find the two stone tablets with the commands of God written on them.

[7 : 45] Setting out the covenant which is the relationship that people have with God based upon binding promises from him. And the reason there are two stones with them isn't because there's just too much to fit on one.

It's a bit like if you were to sign an important contract with a company or about property or something and as you sign it, the people say, you keep that copy and we keep this copy. There are binding obligations on the part of the people to be faithful to God in this covenant.

And the third thing to think about when we see the ark is mercy. The top of the ark, the lid, was called the mercy seat because here was the place that God, because of his mercy, was willing to meet with his people.

King, covenant, and mercy. But the people think if we can just get the ark from Shiloh and bring it to the battlefield, then God will have to give us victory.

It's our badge that says we belong to God. And they fall for it themselves. They've got great confidence in verse 5. When the ark comes into the camp at the battlefield, they all cheer.

[8 : 51] They all shout so loud the ground shakes. And the Philistines hear it and they're afraid. And they sound a bit like C-3PO in verse 8. If you look at the end of verse 7, this is the Philistines, the enemy, saying, oh no, nothing like this has happened before.

We're doomed. But it's because at least they know God is powerful. They know about the Exodus when God rescued these people from slavery in Egypt and he showed his power in inflicting plagues on Egypt at that time where his people were slaves.

And that was known all around the world. But then something really surprising happens. Instead of fleeing, the Philistines turned their fear into courage. And they say in verse 9, be strong, Philistines. Be men. Or you will be subject to the Hebrews as they have been to you. Be men and fight. So the Philistines fought and the Israelites were defeated. And every man fled to his tent.

The slaughter was very great. Israel lost 30,000 foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured. And Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

[10 : 04] That had been promised to Eli that would happen and nothing has changed. They haven't repented. So the judgment has come. It's a national tragedy that day. It's 10 times as many people as died in 9-11 in America.

Extraordinary tragedy. How did it happen? Because the people of God thought they could use God. Instead of living with him as their king, they treated the ark like their mascot.

We're familiar with the idea of mascots, aren't we? Maybe from football. Just got some pictures.

Joanne, if you've got the picture up there of, this is, understand this is Kilmarnock's mascot and is a squirrel, I think.

Stephen or Jonathan can keep us right on that. The next one you'll maybe be more familiar with.

This is Rory the Lion, Middlesbrough's powerful mascot. And the next one we've got here is of course one of the most famous in the world, Partick Thistle's Kingsley.

Famous because he's known to be the most frightening mascot in world football. And apparently because his face is meant to display the kind of, the anguish of being a Partick Thistle supporter.

[11 : 25] This is genuinely true. Genuinely true. But you get the idea with a football mascot, you know, they're a bit of fun and they bring a bit of good luck to the side.

The issue here is when human religion becomes like that, becomes like a lever to try and apply pressure to God, to get a blessing from him.

And it is a catastrophic error of judgment and it warns us today from history. Thousands of bodies lying, strewn across a battlefield in Israel because you cannot use God like that.

And it's an error of judgment that's not always so far from us. Jesus saw the devotion, the religious devotion of the Pharisees in his day, the religious leaders. And he said, because it was

externalized, because they kept God at a distance from their hearts but they were doing all the stuff. And he said, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you. These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. And it's possible to make that mistake corporately as the church today.

[12 : 36] All over the world, the gospel news, the news about Jesus is bearing fruit. We hear about church growth all around the world. We had Simon Peter here a few weeks ago from Uganda. He said, the Anglican church in Uganda is now 22,000 churches.

There's far more people at church, an Anglican church in Uganda on a Sunday than there are in the UK. Why are so many churches closing in the UK?

Why is our experience the church websites of mainline denominations looking more like estate agency websites as they sell off buildings? Well, it might look as though God has lost the battle.

As though God is not powerful. That would be the mistake the Philistines might have thought the day that they took the ark. But all around us in Scotland are mainline denominations who have deliberately, decisively turned from what God has clearly said in his word.

They still have the hallmarks of authentic Christian faith. They might wear crosses, they might share bread and wine, sing hymns on a Sunday together. But they're on a bus driven by the spirit of the age, explaining away the parts of the Bible that contradict our culture's values.

[13:48] And in 21st century Scotland, often we are so confident that we've got our morality sorted, we refuse to believe in a God who disagrees with us. We think, well, the God of the Bible can't be there because of what he says morally.

So we like the idea of a powerful God who's on our side so long as he doesn't rule us with his word. And here we're seeing in 1 Samuel 4, you can't fool God.

You can't use him like that. If we stop listening obediently to his word, he withholds his blessing. Of course, that's not the only reason churches become empty.

There are many factors at play. And there are churches still within the mainline denominations where there are faithful people seeking to press on. And we're not to look at churches closing where they've moved from the Bible and feel self-righteous about it.

At the same time, what's helpful is to remember when we look at a chapter like this that we're not to see when denominations abandon God's word as their authority and the churches decline and the churches get sold off and emptied.

[14:54] We're never to think God is not powerful. God is not powerful to make disciples in our time. He is still reigning. He is still king. But if we try and fool him, then we will find that he turns his favor away from us.

Then what about in our own lives? Well, as a church, it's a good time to ask, are we humbly entrusting ourselves to God? Are we letting him be king? Are we obediently listening to him? And as individuals, it's a good time for self-examination looking at this chapter. Could any of us feel, well, maybe I'm a bit guilty of that, of looking the part as a Christian, but actually, I'm trying to keep control of my own life.

I'm not letting Jesus be the real king in my life and in my heart. Keeping God at a distance. What would it look like for you or me to try and use God to hold on to the marks of Christian observance in the false hope that the power of God will still be on our side?

You can do it with any kind of good thing from God, misusing it. You could do it with a prayer meeting. Are we praying because we've got concerns and we want to humbly bring them before our great God and trust him with the outcome?

[16:14] Or are we doing a kind of half night of prayer because we think, well, if we do that, we'll twist God's arm and he'll have to answer us. It's subtle, but it's a question for us in self-examination so that we don't try and use God.

That's our first point. Secondly, our chapter reveals the glory of God who can't be robbed. So now we're looking at the news reaching the Israelites back home. A refugee runs from the battlefield to Shiloh in verse 12, a 20-mile journey, his clothes torn in distress, and he finds Eli in verse 13, and it's such a sad picture.

This is the spiritual and political leader of the people of God, and we find him in verse 13 watching, because his heart feared for the ark of God. But in verse 15, we're told that he was 98 years old and his eyes had filled so he couldn't see.

So picture the leader of God's people sat by the roadside of the city gate looking in fear because he didn't stop them taking the ark to the battlefield, and he can't see.

And this is true spiritually of the people of God at this time. They're meant to be, the people God rescued, to be a light to the nations and bring the people from all over the world to know God, and it's the blind leading the blind.

[17:34] And he asks the man, what happened, my son? And in verse 17, the man who brought the news replied, Israel fled before the Philistines, Phinehas, and the army has suffered heavy losses, then the personal tragedy, also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead.

But then the climax in verse 17, the ark of God has been captured. When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backwards 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. So it's a terrible end to a terrible era. He's been the judge of Israel 40 years, they've lost the glory of God.

Then the news reaches his pregnant daughter-in-law, she goes into labor, as she hears the agony that her husband is dead, her father-in-law is dead, and the national disaster that the ark has gone, and she has got the spiritual insight to grasp that the joy of a new child is little comfort when you've lost God, you've lost the favor of God on his people.

So she dies in verse 20 as she cries out the name to give the boy Ichabod, and it means where is the glory? And she tells us why, verse 22, the glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has

been captured.

[18:53] This boy, as he grows up, will remind the nation wherever he goes of the mess that they're in spiritually that they've lost God. They rejected him, they despised him, and he moved out. Every morning at school registration, imagine being in his class as his name is read out.

Where is the glory? Oh yeah, the glory's gone. You're in the waiting room at the GP, and out comes the nurse. Where is the glory? Oh, yeah, we lost the glory.

Everyone he meets, every job interview he goes to, I'm, where is the glory? And people remember, the glory left us. Now the glory of God is like the brilliance of God.

It's his grandeur, it's his magnificence, his importance. And there's a play on words in the chapter because in the original language, the word for glory comes from heaviness, from being heavy.

We speak a bit like that today sometimes, don't we? If something, if we want something to be fun and superficial, we say keep it light. And if we think something is important, we say, that was heavy, that was a heavy blow, or we say it was weighty.

[20:01] Similar idea. But we got a little detail about Eli that we didn't need when he died in verse 18. It could have just said, when he fell backwards off his chair, his neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man.

But what does it say? For he was an old man and he was heavy. In other words, he was weighty. Or to get the meaning in English, we could say, for he was an old man and he was gloriously fat.

And this was all connected for us back in chapter 2. How do we know that God was not being glorified by Eli and his sons? That God was disrespected by them?

That his importance was a light thing to them? God's concerns were unimportant to them. How do we know? We know because when people brought the animals to Shiloh to offer them to God because they were rightly his, Eli's sons stole them to roast them to eat them.

Eli's heaviness is a visible reminder that he stole God's glory for himself. So when Ichabod's name makes us ask, where is the glory? One answer is, oh, the glory is gone.

[21:12] The ark was lost. The glory has left Israel. But when we ask, where is the glory? Another answer would be, the glory is around Eli's waistline.

As he took what should rightly belong to God, the offerings, and he stole them for himself. So the warning of verses 1 to 11 was you can't use God or you can't fool God.

The warning of verses 12 to 22 is you can't rob God. You can't steal from him what's his. You can't rob him of his glory. And his glory is his weightiness.

How much do the concerns of God press in on your life? The danger is we treat God a bit like a waiter. I was out for dinner a couple of weeks ago around the corner getting a pizza with the guys who came and did the parenting evening here.

The waiter came over and he gave us our menus. We were polite to him. He was polite to us. He came and took our order. Then he was peripheral.

[22:13] He went away. He brought our food. We summoned him back at one point and asked for something else. He was there for us when we needed him. But I can't remember his name.

That's how we can find ourselves treating God in our lives. We've got our lives, our relationships, the things going on. It's like a dinner party. And God is around the edges like a waiter.

We occasionally ask for his help. We're polite enough. But he's peripheral to our lives. And God reveals to us in the Bible that he is the host of our lives.

We are gathered around the dinner table. Everything we have belongs to him. It's all come from him. It's all a gift from him that we might live for him, for his glory.

He's not there for us when we need a bit of help. We're there for him. And when we push him to the edges and we take the good things he's given us for ourselves, we're robbing him of his glory.

[23:14] And 1 Samuel asks us, what weighs heavily on you? What is of first importance? Is it a concern for God? Are you pressed down with God?

The writer David Wells says, it's one of the defining marks of our time that God is now weightless. He has become unimportant. He rests upon the world so inconsequentially as not to be noticeable. Even those who believe in his existence consider him less interesting than television and his commands less authoritative than their appetites for affluence and influence.

That is weightlessness. And that's the end of the chapter. We've seen the power of God who can't be fooled and the glory of God who can't be robbed.

But thirdly, as we close, let's just think about the ark of God that we all need. By the end of 1 Samuel 4, Israel has lost the glory of God's presence with them.

[24 : 19] But as we go on in the unfolding history of God's dealings with his people, eventually we get to the Apostle John speaking about Jesus for us and saying of him, the word, the eternal son of God became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only son who came from the Father full of grace and truth. The tragedy of 1 Samuel 4 is the lost glory of God.

But when we go to Jesus, we find the glory of God in all its fullness in him. And supremely, that glory is on display for us today, not through a wooden box, but through the wooden cross.

As Jesus went to the cross, he said to his father, Father, the hour has come. Glorify your son that your son may glorify you. And we see the display of God's glory at the cross because it is everything the ark of God foreshadowed.

Remember, with the ark, we were to think about king, the Lord is king. And as Jesus was nailed to the cross and lifted up there, the sign they put above his head was the king of the Jews.

[25 : 31] It's because he was obedient to death on the cross that God has now exalted him and he is king of kings and God promises one day every knee will bow to him. The ark reminded the people of the covenant on the tablets of stone.

But as Jesus looked forward to his death with his disciples, he passed around the bread and the wine and he said, this is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.

A covenant not written on tablets of stone but as he bled out on the cross. And the ark showed the people God's mercy.

The mercy seat was where God condescended to dwell with his people. And at the cross we see God's mercy in fullness. That he knew we tried to rob him of his glory and so Jesus was willing to bear our shame that we deserve.

That he might share his glory with us forever. And when we grasp that, when we grasp by the strength of the spirit enlarging our hearts that the ultimate display of God's glory is in his work as a king who gave himself for us at the cross, it moves us to trust God enough to draw near to him, to stop trying to use him, to stop trying to keep him at a distance but to ask him to be king of our lives.

[26 : 57] The world sees the cross and sees weakness but here is the power of God to save everyone who believes. The world sees the cross and sees shame but see the glorious son of God bearing your shame so that you could come to him and see God's glory and have hope of that glory forever.

So in 1 Samuel 4 Israel lost the ark of God but whoever we are this morning, however much of a mess we're in, the invitation is wide open to come back to God through the cross.

Let's pray together. Just some words that any of us might want to echo along in our hearts.

Heavenly Father, we're sorry for the times that we try and exercise our own control over life with you. wanting your favor but keeping you at a distance from our hearts.

We acknowledge that we've sought to live for our glory and have not let your glory press in upon our lives. Thank you that Jesus, our great king, chose the cross appearing in weakness but revealing your power to save us.

[28 : 14] Dying in shame but revealing your glory. Father, what a great king we have to worship that he would give us a fresh start, a new covenant that he opens the floodgates of your mercy to us.

Enlarge our hearts we pray to grasp the power of the cross and the glory of the cross that we would rejoice to have you enthroned over our lives.

We pray for Jesus' name's sake. Amen.