



Unit .10

Session .02

God Rescues His Ark

Scripture



**1 Sam. 4:2-7,10-11;
6:13-16,19-21**

2 The Philistines lined up in battle formation against Israel, and as the battle intensified, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who struck down about four thousand men on the battlefield. **3** When the troops returned to the camp, the elders of Israel asked, “Why did the LORD defeat us today before the Philistines? Let’s bring the ark of the LORD’s covenant from Shiloh. Then it will go with us and save us from our enemies.” **4** So the people sent men to Shiloh to bring back the ark of the covenant of the LORD of Armies, who is enthroned between the cherubim. Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. **5** When the ark of the covenant of the LORD entered the camp, all the Israelites raised such a loud shout that the ground shook. **6** The Philistines heard the sound of the war cry and asked, “What’s this loud shout in the Hebrews’ camp?” When the Philistines discovered that the ark of the LORD had entered the camp, **7** they panicked. “A god has entered their camp!” they said. “Woe to us, nothing like this has happened before. ... **10** So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and each man fled to his tent. The slaughter was severe—thirty thousand of the Israelite foot soldiers fell. **11** The ark of God was

captured, and Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died. ... **13** The people of Beth-shemesh were harvesting wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they were overjoyed to see it. **14** The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there near a large rock. The people of the city chopped up the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. **15** The Levites removed the ark of the LORD, along with the box containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. That day the people of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the LORD. **16** When the five Philistine rulers observed this, they returned to Ekron that same day. ... **19** God struck down the people of Beth-shemesh because they looked inside the ark of the LORD. He struck down seventy persons. The people mourned because the LORD struck them with a great slaughter. **20** The people of Beth-shemesh asked, “Who is able to stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God? To whom should the ark go from here?” **21** They sent messengers to the residents of Kiriath-jearim, saying, “The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and get it.”

Intro Options



Main Point:
**God's people are to trust
in Him alone, and not in
spiritual superstitions.**

Option 1

Inform your students that the middle school news team at their schools has hired them to create a PSA for the middle school morning news (if their schools don't have a media team or morning news, tell them to pretend they do). Their job is to create a minute-long (or so) public service announcement entitled, "How to Tell A Real Friend from a Fake Friend." Split them into small groups and instruct them to produce skits to help middle schoolers identify the difference between fake and true friends.

Let them prep and then show the skits. Talk about what similarities or sharp insights they saw. Would it be fair to say that one key difference is that real friends care for you just because of who you are, whereas fake friends care more about what they can get from you?

Segue into applying this distinction to God: do we love God for who he is, or for what we can get from him? In today's lesson we'll see that the Israelites treated God as a good-luck charm, a means toward what they wanted; they did not love him for himself.

Option 2

Set up this opening by asking students to do an improv session. You can ask for a few volunteers or have the entire group take part. You're going to give them different situations, and their job is to act like they are bystanders in those situations. Here are the situations (you can, of course, add or remove other situations as your imagination allows): Football Game; School classroom; Elementary school recess; Celebratory parade for soldiers coming home; Farewell for soldiers going to the front; Funeral for a fallen soldier; Pop star concert; Church; School lunch; etc.

Discuss the different demeanors and attitudes present in the different situations. Why do we act differently in different situations? Why do some situations, like a soldier's funeral, call for sobriety, but others, like a parade, call for exuberance?

Point out that certain situations and even certain people demand certain attitudes on our part. What attitude should we manifest toward God's presence? In part three of today's lesson, the Israelites will sin because they fail to respect God's holiness as they ought.

TEACHING PLAN

The Philistines, a five-city league working together as one, were the major enemy of Israel during the time of Samson, Samuel, Saul, and David. In 1 Samuel 4:1, we are told that the Israelites went out to battle against the Philistines. But their first day of fighting did not go well, and they began to panic.

Read 1 Samuel 4:2-7.



The Israelites staggered into their camp after a long and brutal day of fighting. Faced with the reality of their loss, they looked for answers as to why, and the elders correctly named God as the cause of their defeat (1 Sam. 4:3; see Job 1:21-22; 2:10). Whether actively or permissively, God's sovereign hand delivered the Israelites into the Philistines' hands.

▪ Why do you think God would have allowed the Israelites' to be defeated?

The reason for the Israelites' defeat before the Philistines was "sin in the camp." Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were dishonoring God and taking advantage of their position as priests, and Eli allowed their behavior to go on unchecked. But instead of looking for the sin problem amongst the people, the elders came to a different conclusion. They decided to bring the ark of the covenant out to the battle in order to turn the battle in their favor.

When Hophni and Phinehas brought the ark into the camp, the Israelites cheered and shook the ground. The Philistines, however, shook in fear, recalling the tales of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and their victories in the wilderness (1 Sam. 4:6-9). So the Israelites charged confidently into battle, and the Philistines fought as courageously as possible. But in spite of the ark's presence, God was not present, and Israel suffered a worse defeat than before as they were slaughtered by the Philistines.

Read 1 Samuel 4:10-11.



Hophni and Phinehas were killed, as was prophesied to Eli, and the ark was captured by the Philistines and taken to the temple of their god Dagon (1 Sam. 4:10-11).

▪ How do you think the Israelites felt seeing the ark captured and taken from them?

After this, Eli was told of the death of his sons and the capture of the ark. The result: Eli fell over in his chair, broke his neck, and died when he heard the news (1 Sam. 4:17-18). Furthermore, when told the news that the ark was taken and her husband had died, Phinehas's wife went into early labor and died. With her last breath, she named her new son "Ichabod," which means "no glory" or "Where is the glory?" (1 Sam. 4:19-22). With the loss of the ark, the symbol of God's presence, she understood that God's glory had departed from Israel as well.

The Israelites valued a symbol of God's presence and power above the real thing, God Himself. This is a form of idolatry; it may look good or right but it falls short.

▪ What are some common examples today of people treasuring a symbol of God's glory rather than in God Himself?

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God's people are to trust
in Him alone, and not in
spiritual superstitions.

1 Samuel 4

2-3. The Israelites had lost previous battles before on account of their sin. In response to Achan's sin of keeping some of the spoil from Jericho, the Lord did not fight for the Israelites, and they were routed by the small city of Ai (Josh. 6-7). Not only that, but in response to the idolatry of the people in the promised land, the Lord repeatedly sold them into the hands of oppressors until they came to their senses and cried out to the Lord (Judg. 2:11-15; 3:7-8; 10:6-10).

4. The ark was a gold-covered chest that contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments, a jar of manna, and Aaron's staff (Heb. 9:4). But it was much more than a chest. On the lid was a representation of two angelic beings with wings, and the Lord was said to be enthroned between the cherubim. So it was a memory box and a throne—a representation of the presence of God among the people. The ark had led the way through the Jordan River into the promised land (Josh. 3-4). The ark was part of the procession around the walls of Jericho before they fell (Josh. 6). And now the Israelites wanted it to lead them to victory over the Philistines.

10-11. The decision to bring the ark of the Lord's covenant into battle was both superstitious and a tacit attempt to manipulate God into giving them victory. This tactic proved futile as Israel was defeated and the ark was captured (vv. 10-11).

1 Samuel 6

13-16. The Lord Himself brought His ark of the covenant home to Israel. The Israelites didn't go after it or bargain for it; they moved on with life. But all the while, the Lord was working and displaying His glory among the Philistines. Beth-shemesh was one of the cities set aside for the livelihood of the Levites, the priestly tribe of Israel. This city, among others, specifically was given for the descendants of Aaron, who were responsible for the care of the tabernacle and the sacrifices (Josh. 21:9-10, 13-16). How fitting that the ark should return to this city filled with those who were responsible for its care (Num. 4:1-20). But there may be an indication that the faithfulness of the priests was faltering in that they offered the female milk cows as a burnt offering, which required an unblemished male animal (Lev. 1:3), and they displayed the ark on a large rock for everyone's eyes to behold which had been forbidden by God (Num. 4:15, 20).



99 Essential Doctrines *(p. 16, DDG)*

Jesus' Deity

Within the person of Jesus Christ, there are two natures—the divine nature and the human nature. Scripture teaches He is fully divine and fully human. His divinity is on display in passages that describe Him as being equal with God (John 1:1-18; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-3). The New Testament also points to the deity of Christ by showing how He possesses attributes that God alone possesses (Mic. 5:2; John 1:4), how He performs works that only God performs (Mark 2:5-12; John 10:28; 17:2), and how He Himself claims to be the Son of God (Matt. 26:63-64; John 8:58; 10:30; 17:5).

TEACHING PLAN

The Philistines captured the ark and put it in the temple of their god Dagon; they believed they had bested the God of Israel, having defeated the Israelites. They misunderstood the situation, however. God let them win to execute judgment on Eli's sons and to teach His people and the Philistines a lesson: The Lord fights for His own glory.

While the Israelites believed the glory of God was lost (1 Sam. 4:19-22), the Lord defended His glory among the enemies of His people. For two mornings in a row after putting the ark in the temple of Dagon, the statue of Dagon was found prostrate on his face before the ark. On the second morning, his head and hands had broken off as well (5:1-5). Not only that, but the Philistines of Ashdod, Gath, and then Ekron were all afflicted with tumors and the fear of death when the ark came to their cities (5:6-12). And after seven months of turmoil, the Philistines decided to send the ark back with a guilt offering of gold objects symbolizing their affliction to appease the God of the Israelites.

- **What are some common day idols God might bring down to demonstrate He alone is worthy of our devotion and worship?**

Read 1 Samuel 6:13-16,19-21.



The Israelites at Beth-shemesh received the ark with joy, worship, and sacrifices. But then the Lord punished seventy inhabitants of the city with death. What was their offense? They looked upon and into the ark of the covenant, the symbol of God's presence. Once again, God's people treated casually what should have been regarded as holy.

By way of illustration, we are told all our lives not to stare at the sun because it will burn our retinas. The power of the sun can damage our eyesight when we do not have respect for that power. So we may briefly glance at the sun or cover our eyes, but we shouldn't look directly at it. The Lord gave strict instructions to Aaron and his descendants to cover the ark before it was moved from the tabernacle so the people would not look at the representation of God's holy presence and die; nor were the people to touch the ark, lest they die (Num. 4:15,17-20). The people of Beth-shemesh violated both of these commands as they curiously looked at and into the ark of the Lord.



The Lord commanded His people Israel to be holy as He is holy (Lev. 19:1-2). As the people of God, they were to be different from the nations around them. But when the Lord punished those who did not respect His ark, the people of Beth-shemesh responded just as the Philistines did—they wanted to send the ark away. The fear of death came upon them, and instead of running to God in faith and repentance, they ran away from His holy presence.

God expects His people to follow His pattern of holiness in both separation from sin and devotion to His glory. But even in the midst of our sin, the Lord calls us back to Himself. That's part of the gospel—while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). And when we sin again, Christ has still died for us (1 John 2:1-2). The Beth-shemites sent away God's presence symbolized in the ark, but God's presence in Christ will never leave or forsake His people because He dwells not on a box but in our hearts.



- **How can repentance distinguish Christians from the world and be a witness to the world?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:

God's people are to trust in Him alone, and not in spiritual superstitions.

1 Samuel 6

19-21. The ark was holy because God had set it apart to reflect His holiness. It stayed in the most holy place behind the veil in the tabernacle until it was time to move it, and then it was covered by that same veil so it remained out of sight. Only on one day of the year—the Day of Atonement—was one person, the high priest, allowed to enter the most holy place to make atonement for the sins of the entire community. The blood of a sacrifice was brought in and sprinkled on the mercy seat, or the lid of the ark, where the Lord was said to be enthroned.

In such an irreverent, rebellious, and cynical world, we can forget about God's holiness. Having everything at our fingertips, from bottled water to the Internet to items delivered to our homes and devices with the click of a button, it can be easy to forget God. But this isn't just an issue because of our world, culture, or environment. Our propensity to forget about God and His holiness comes from deep within us. We are sinners by nature. Our hearts need to be changed, and that work is accomplished through the presence of God. By faith in Christ, we become the sanctuary in which God dwells; we become temples of the Holy Spirit. Then our fear is transformed, and it becomes our delight to revere and stand in awe of God, the Holy One, and to proclaim His holiness and salvation to the whole world.

Activity

Have your students come up with a list of traditional superstitions (four-leafed clovers, opening umbrellas indoors, walking under ladders). Now, ask them to come up with a list of contemporary Christian superstitions. They'll probably have a tough time coming up with them initially, so start them off with some clues. For example:

Prayer: if I ask God for something hard enough, I'll get it

Good deeds: if I do good deeds, nothing (really) bad should happen to me

Romance: if I just hold out long enough and seek God, I will find the perfect love

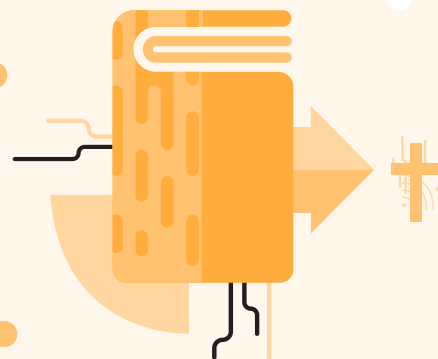
Bible reading: if I do Bible reading every morning, my day will go better

Church attendance: if I go to church, I've satisfied God and can live the rest of my life my way

Once you've come up with your list, split your crew into smaller groups (maybe 3 or so people each). Have each group pick one Christian superstition. They should now create a skit wherein someone has been "let down" by the Christian superstition they chose. Another character (or two) in the skit should comfort the let-down person using the material we learned from today's lesson.

(p. 18, DDG) Christ Connection

The people of Israel mistook the ark as the symbol of God's presence with His actual presence. Years later, God gave His people something greater than a symbol of His presence when He gave them His Son, Jesus. Many people didn't recognize Jesus for who He is—God in the flesh who came to unite people with God.



Our Mission

God's Story has always been designed to connect with our story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own. Suggested answers to these questions can be found on the right-hand side of the page for leaders.

Head



How might our response toward sin in our own lives mirror that of the Israelites?

What are some things we learn about sin and repentance in this story?

Heart



How does the Bible understand repentance?

What are some persistent sins you need to repent from?

Hands



Why is it a good thing for God to break down the idols in our lives?

What are some current "idols" in your life right now that are preventing you from becoming more like Jesus?

Main Point:
**God's people are to trust
in Him alone, and not in
spiritual superstitions.**



Head

Our response to sin is much like the Philistines and the Israelites. In fact, our response is much like Adam and Eve in the garden as well—we want to run and hide (Gen. 3:8-10). We try to suppress what we know to be true about God, and as a result we end up embracing sin, defying both His glory and our own good. And instead of turning to God in genuine repentance and faith, we would rather deal with the consequences of our sin than deal with the heart issues behind it. Let us recognize sin for what it really is, while simultaneously recognizing the fact that we have a heavenly Father who is merciful and gracious towards those who come to Him in faith and repentance.



Heart

As we've learned from the Israelites, the appropriate response to our sin is repentance. Instead of avoiding our sin or being overly concerned about the consequences of it, God would have us respond by recognizing our wrongdoing, turning from our sin, and turning to Him for grace and mercy. In fact, that is exactly what repentance is about—having a change of heart and direction that leads to God through the forgiveness He provides in Christ.



Hands

We learn from this account that God is willing to get our attention by breaking down idols in our lives that we have constructed in order to show that He alone is worthy of our love and devotion. It is important for us to understand that when He does this, it is not only for His glory but our own good as well. Yes, it may hurt emotionally or even physically, depending on the heart idols we have constructed, but it is for our good in the long run. God knows exactly what is necessary in order to make us look more like Jesus, and looking more like Him should be our desire as well.