

1 Samuel 4

The Israelites went out to fight the Philistines (v. 1). Who were the Philistines? The Philistines were Israel's primary enemy at this time. They were a pagan, non-Semitic people who originally migrated from Greece/Crete. They lived in five main towns in southwest Canaan along the Mediterranean seacoast. —Gaza, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath, and Ashdod.

What were the results of that battle (v. 2)? The Israelites were soundly defeated.

What classic mistake did the Israelites make? They apparently didn't pray, consult or seek the go-ahead from God before engaging in battle. They were operating in their own strength assuming God would bless them with a victory simply because they were His chosen people. However, God would not defend the Israelites because they had ceased to honor Him.¹

When they were defeated, who did they blame (v. 3)? The Lord.

After they were defeated, did they consult God before reengaging in battle? They asked but didn't listen and didn't wait for an answer (v. 3). The elders of Israel were right in recognizing they needed help from God to win the battle. But they were wrong in the way they went about getting help. Instead of humbly repenting and seeking God, they turned to a strategy that God never approved.

What was their strategy (v. 3)? Take the Ark of the Covenant with them into battle. They assumed it would work to give them victory.

The ark had gone into battle before. In what famous battle was the ark carried before the Israelites?

Jericho ([Joshua 6:6](#)). However, at Jericho, the Israelites were following God's leading not their own ideas. The ark *did* represent the presence of the Lord in battle but only when the people carried it in faith and by divine leading.

What do we know about the Ark of the Covenant? In the mind of the Israelite, the Ark of the Covenant was the place where God's presence dwelt. It was eventually placed in the Tabernacle in the inner sanctum of the Most Holy Place ([Exodus 40:2-3](#)).

The Ark of the Covenant contained Aaron's rod that had budded, a gold jar of manna and the two stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments ([Hebrews 9:4](#)).

What was the reaction of the *Israelites* when the ark came into the Hebrew camp (v. 5)? The camp became like a huge pep rally before a football game. The Israelite warriors were really excited. They figured they would be invincible in battle with the ark by their side.

What was the reaction of the *Philistines* when the ark came into the Hebrew camp (vv. 6-9)? They were terrified! The Philistines had heard about the ark's association with Israel's mighty God who had brought the Israelites out of Egypt more than 300 years before.² They now feared that the presence of the ark going before the Israelite armies into battle would assure Israel of a victory. They might die, the Philistines concluded, but at least they could die like men. And so, rather than give up, the Philistines became motivated to fight to the death and to die like heroes.

How did the battle turn out (vv. 10-11)? Summoning their courage, the Philistines fought on and they defeated Israel in devastating fashion – 30,000 Israelite soldiers were killed. In the process, the ark was captured and the sons of Eli, its keepers, were killed.

What was the Israelites' mistake in the second battle? Without fasting and prayer and without consulting God, the Israelites decide to practice "Rabbits-Foot Theology." The ark was viewed by the Israelites as a good luck

charm; they believed that wherever they took it, they would be blessed. They were looking to the ark to save them, not the Lord of the ark. They believed the presence of the ark would make God work for them; God would have no choice. They tried to manipulate the Lord for their gain.

Simply, they are putting God to the test. This is the very thing Satan encouraged Jesus to do in His wilderness temptation, trying to “force” God into doing a miracle by suggesting Jesus leap off the pinnacle of the temple.

The fact that the Israelites suffered a devastating slaughter (v. 10) in this second battle, many times worse than their earlier recent defeat (v. 2), proved that victory did not come from the ark but from the LORD. Defeat was due to sin in the camp, including that of Hophni and Phinehas (cf. 2:25).

Israel had suffered defeat at Ai, about 300 years earlier, for the same reason: sin among the people ([Joshua 7:11](#)). Trying to duplicate previous spiritual victories (Jericho e.g.) by going through the same procedures is no substitute for getting right with God (cf. [Judges 16:20](#); [Matthew 23:25](#)).³

Application: The Israelites tried to manipulate the Lord for their gain. **What are some of the ways we try to manipulate God?** By bargaining with God....If you will only do x, I promise I will do y.

What was Eli's main concern when he received news of the battle results (vv. 17-18)? The deaths of his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who accompanied the soldiers into battle, were the sign God had promised Eli that He would remove the priestly privilege from Eli's descendants eventually (2:34). The writer carefully recorded that it was the news that the Philistines had captured the ark, not that his two sons had died, that shocked Eli and caused him to die. Eli's primary concern, to his credit, was the welfare of Israel.⁴

What was the response of Eli's daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas (vv. 19-22)? The bad news caused the wife of Phinehas to go into labor, and she died in childbirth. Hearing of the death of her father-in-law and her husband did not seem to affect her as much as that the ark had fallen into the hands of the Philistines.⁵

The presence of the ark represented the presence of God in Israel. Not only was the ark gone but God Himself and all His glory were now in enemy hands. God had been captured!! The Israelites should have known that their omnipresent God could not be taken away from them.

What did she name her son (v. 21)? Ichabod, meaning “The glory has departed.” But God's glory will never be hidden by sinful men. You could write that same cry today across many churches, many ministries and many individual Christian lives today!

These testimonies reveal to us the esteem with which the ark was held. It had become an idol to the Israelites.

What does God want from these Israelites that they are not giving Him? Their hearts! [1 Samuel 16:7](#) *The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.* God has not changed. He still wants our hearts today. God chased the hearts of the Israelites all over the Old Testament. He does the same with us today.

[Psalm 51:16-17](#) *You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

¹ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 300.

² Eugene H. Merrill, “1 Samuel,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck*, vol. 1 (Victor Books, 1985), 436.

³ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on 1 Samuel*, 2024 Edition (published by Sonic Light), 48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 300.