

1 SAMUEL—WEEK 3

THE BIG LOSS



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is David and Goliath by Titian (1487–1576)
On display in the church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, Italy

Samuel grows and gains well-deserved fame. But Israel is increasingly reprobate and manages to lose a battle so badly that the ark is captured.

Eli, his two sons, and even Eli's daughter-in-law die—in accordance with what God told Samuel.

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T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

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! Samuel, Week 3 — The Big Loss

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1 1 Samuel 3:19–4:1a

So Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel had been established as a prophet of the LORD. Then the LORD appeared again in Shiloh. For the LORD revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the LORD.

And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.

The phrase, “*let none of his words fall to the ground,*” means none of Samuel’s words failed to be accurate. That’s the test of a prophet; one false statement is all it takes to be identified as a phony. One hundred percent is the only passing grade. The LORD being with Samuel gave him perfect accuracy.

The phrase, “*from Dan to Beersheba,*” means all of Israel. The city of Dan (not the region of Dan) is at the far northern end of Israel. The city of Beersheba is near the southern end. Before electronic communication, news pretty much traveled at a walking speed. Samuel presumably walked around Israel in his role as a prophet. Gradually, one town at a time, people learned that he was reliable.

Eventually, throughout Israel, *Samuel had been established as a prophet of the LORD.*

But then the saga returns to Shiloh, where worship is centered, where Samuel’s mom made the vow to give her son to the LORD, where Samuel was raised by Eli.

This time the LORD appears. He reveals Himself to Samuel by His word.

Something big is afoot.

More often than not, when something big is afoot, it’s not going to be all peaches and cream. God’s plans are complicated. The action can get exciting—even too exciting.

That’s what’s about to happen here in 1 Samuel. Things are going to go horribly wrong, at least from a local point of view.

But from our vantage point, reading about it thousands of years later, all the excitement is part of something great and glorious. Thus, we stumble into a complex lesson.

When something like this happens to us, how can we separate ourselves from the chaos and pain of the local point of view, and start to appreciate that something big is afoot?

This is where reformed doctrine can come in handy. The view that God foreordains all things means that He’s always up to something. This reminds us to be on the lookout for the grand plan behind events.

But let’s not oversell this. Looking for the grand plan isn’t the same as finding it.

Frankly, you can look a long time before finding even a piece of the big picture—but it’s worth the wait.

2 1 Samuel 4:1b–11

Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines, and encamped beside Ebenezer; and the Philistines encamped in Aphek. Then the Philistines put themselves in battle array against Israel. And when they joined battle, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men of the army in the field. And when the people had come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, “Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD from Shiloh to us, that when it comes among us it may save us from the hand of our enemies.” So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who dwells between the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

And when the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted so loudly that the earth shook. Now when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, “What does the sound of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews mean?” Then they understood that the ark of the LORD had come into the camp. So the Philistines were afraid, for they said, “God has come into the camp!” And they said, “Woe to us! For such a thing has never happened before. Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness. Be strong and conduct yourselves like men, you Philistines, that you do not become servants of the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Conduct yourselves like men, and fight!”

So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent. There was a very great slaughter, and there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. Also the ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

Israel loses a battle and their first reaction is, “Hey, let’s get the magic ark. That wins every time, right?”

Notice how this goes wrong. They ask the right question—“*Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines?*”—but they ask wrong person. They ask each other instead of asking the LORD.

That’s how they came up with this hair-brained scheme and lost the ark.

At the root of their hair-brained scheme is using God to get what they want. They have no interest in learning what God wants; they know what they want and they know how to use God to get it.

They’re not thinking of God as their Lord. He’s powerful and useful, but not the one calling the shots. So the ark is just a tool they can use to advance their cause. This is, of course, hilariously stupid—until we see that same attitude in ourselves. Of course we don’t have the ark to use to get our way; we have prayer.

So, the takeaway is to not use prayer that way. One popular approach to proper prayer is to use the “Be Thou My Vision” devotional. Another is ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication).

But if the supplications seek His help without seeking His will, they still miss the point.

3 1 Samuel 4:12–18

Then a man of Benjamin ran from the battle line the same day, and came to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dirt on his head. Now when he came, there was Eli, sitting on a seat by the wayside watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told it, all the city cried out. When Eli heard the noise of the outcry, he said, “What does the sound of this tumult mean?” And the man came quickly and told Eli. Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes were so dim that he could not see.

Then the man said to Eli, “I am he who came from the battle. And I fled today from the battle line.”

And he said, “What happened, my son?”

So the messenger answered and said, “Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has been a great slaughter among the people. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead; and the ark of God has been captured.”

Then it happened, when he made mention of the ark of God, that Eli fell off the seat backward by the side of the gate; and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years.

It’s curious that the text mentions Eli’s weight as contributing to his death. Falling backwards off one’s seat at 98 years of age will kill you for sure, even if you’re skinny. So why mention Eli’s weight?

It’s to make a point. Recall what his sons did with the highest calorie portion of the sacrifice.

And if the man said to him, “They should really burn the fat first; then you may take as much as your heart desires,” he would then answer him, “No, but you must give it now; and if not, I will take it by force.” — 1 Samuel 2:16

“Why do you kick at My sacrifice and My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling place, and honor your sons more than Me, to make yourselves fat with the best of all the offerings of Israel My people?” — 1 Samuel 2:29

The Hebrew word translated as “make yourselves fat” (לְהַבְרִיחֶם, le-hav-ri-ah-khem) in 1 Samuel 2:29 is second person plural; it includes Eli in the ones made *fat*. The connection is intentional. Eli didn’t die because he was fat.

He died because he disobeyed God’s commands.

If Eli judged Israel for forty years before dying at age ninety-eight, then he was fifty-eight when he started judging Israel. That seems late for starting such a significant career.

Or maybe not. Some careers favor youth, but not all. Wisdom comes from experience.

Experience clearly accumulates with age.

4 1 Samuel 4:19–22

Now his daughter-in-law, Phinehas' wife, was with child, due to be delivered; and when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and gave birth, for her labor pains came upon her. And about the time of her death the women who stood by her said to her, "Do not fear, for you have borne a son." But she did not answer, nor did she regard it. Then she named the child Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel!" because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. And she said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."

She's wrong. The ark isn't Israel's glory, and its capture isn't the issue. That said, the wheels definitely are falling off the wagon. The *glory* may not have departed, but something's gone.

Yeah, and what else is new?

Phinehas' wife's focus on the ark—and Eli's similar attitude—raise an important issue. Where do we draw the line between legitimate interest and idolatry? Is their extreme focus on the ark idolatry?

Obviously, the ark wasn't created as an idol; its creation was specifically commissioned by the LORD. Does that mean it can't be an idol? What is the standard?

As we drill into this, the first thing to note is that since this is about sin, the core issue is our actions.

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them." — Exodus 20:4–5a

The sin is in the verbs—*make* and *bow*. That's what's prohibited. You can, for example, *look* at an idol in a museum. Ancient artifacts from pagan cultures can be studied and written about. That's not sinful. It's when we ascribe undue significance to them that there's a problem.

Secondly, the sin is *idolatry*, not idols, and not all idolatry involves a physical idol.

Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. — Colossians 3:5

Question 95 of the Heidelberg catechism asks, "*What is idolatry?*"

A. Idolatry is having or inventing something in which one trusts in place of or alongside of the only true God, who has revealed himself in the Word. (1 Chron. 16:26; Gal. 4:8-9; Eph. 5:5; Phil. 3:19)

It's the attitude toward the thing being idolized that's sinful. It's sinful because something else is supplanting the one true God.

The second commandment derives from the first—there is but one God.

5 1 Samuel 5:1–5

Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon. And when the people of Ashdod arose early in the morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the earth before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and set it in its place again. And when they arose early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. The head of Dagon and both the palms of its hands were broken off on the threshold; only Dagon's torso was left of it. Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor any who come into Dagon's house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

Once again, people are treating the ark like a tool they can use for their own purposes.

That's a category error. The ark, like God himself, cannot be subordinated. It's not that kind of thing.

The Philistines thought that when they captured the ark, they took ownership. It's obvious where they got that idea; the Israelites treated the ark like they owned it.

But the ark is called the ark of the covenant (or Testimony) because that's what it is. It contains the hard copies of a sacred contract between the creator of the universe and His chosen people. The solid gold lid (mercy seat) with solid gold cherubim on either end is where God meets with and speaks to His people.

You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you. And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel. — Exodus 25:21–22

It's of no use to the Philistines—as they're now finding out the hard way.

God's messages often are delivered "loud and clear." Notice how He cranks up the volume in today's passage. The first time, Dagon just does a face-plant.

But when that message doesn't get through, the next face-plant is more emphatic. The Philistines can't superglue Dagon back together like we can nowadays. They need a new Dagon.

The lesson for us in this is to not be so hard of hearing. God will make his point. If He has to crank up the volume, so be it. Pain is a great way to get someone's attention..

So, be "God aware". Most things that happen are not signs from God, but some are. They tend to be pretty obvious if you're paying attention. Unfortunately, that's not always the case.

The ones I've missed have usually been because I was too sure of myself and too resistant to a change in plans.

I have often been on the brink of losing my temper (at God!) when I came to my senses.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Do you feel God's presence in tough situations?
2. God tells us to bring out petitions before Him. How do we balance this with seeking His will?
3. What "second career" attracts you?
4. Why does Colossians 3:5 call covetousness "idolatry"?
5. Have you ever learned something valuable by being angry at God?

Items for prayer: