

1

## LIFE LESSONS – 1 SAMUEL: Spiritual Superstitions<sup>i</sup> 1 Samuel 4

### INTRODUCTION:

Good morning, Trinity! It is good to see you here this morning. If you are a guest with us, thanks for joining us on this Lord's Day. We would love the opportunity to get to know you more. You can help us connect with you by texting the keyword, TBCMP, which stands for Trinity Baptist Church Mount Pleasant, to the number 94-000. When you send that keyword, a link will be sent back to you and that will take you to a short form. When you submit that form, it notifies me, and I look forward to following up with you.

Or feel free to swing by our information center located in the fellowship area. There we have a gift we would love to put in your hands as a way of saying thank you for being our guest today. We are thrilled you have chosen to worship with us today.

### SERIES OVERVIEW:

We are working our way through the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel in a teaching series we have entitled, "Life Lessons." In our study so far, we have looked at Hannah, Samuel's mother, and her prayer for a child. How God blessed Hannah and gave her Samuel. She then gave him back to God to serve Him all the days of Samuel's life. We saw the grave sinfulness of Eli's sons and the consequences that brought. Last week we studied how Samuel learned to hear God speak.

Today, we are going to study chapter 4 of 1 Samuel in a message I've titled, "Spiritual Superstitions." I want to invite you to turn with me in your bibles to 1 Samuel chapter 4.

### **OPENING ILLUSTRATION: Baseball Superstitions**

If you have been around me at all, you know my love for baseball. I played a little in high school and I've been privileged to coach my sons through little league and now into high school. I don't necessarily like watching it on TV, but I love going to games and coaching games. It's the best sport in the world.

But baseball is one of the most superstitious sports there is. Did you know that it is common practice for baseball players to refuse to wash hats, helmets, or uniforms if they are on a winning streak? I'm sure you've all heard that you are

2

to never step on the foul lines when going onto and coming off of the field. What about superstitions surrounding a player's pre-batting routine. Many players draw a cross in the dirt or do the whole cross thing on their chest before they get into the batter's box. There is also the rally cap, where you turn your hat inside out in the final innings to start a comeback.

In addition to those routines, baseball also has the curse of the bambino. After the Red Sox sold Babe Ruth to the Yankees in 1919, Boston has struggled. And of course, you never talk about or even mention that a pitcher has a no-hitter going. Baseball is a sport of superstitions.

Our passage of study has much of the same imagery. Israel had gotten to the point, because of poor spiritual leadership, that they believed more in superstition than in a relationship with God.

So, this morning I want us to study our passage by looking at the superstition, the surrender, and the sentence. Then we will talk through a couple life lessons we learn.

### MESSAGE:

So, let's first begin by looking at...

#### 1) **The Superstition.**

Let's begin reading together in 1 Samuel, chapter 4, verse 1.

*<sup>1</sup>And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. <sup>2</sup>The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle.*

It seems from other texts and translations that it was the Philistines that initiated the attack on Israel. We learn that prior to the battle the Israelite army was gathered at a town called Ebenezer. We are most familiar with the term Ebenezer because of the Christmas figure Ebenezer Scrooge. But Ebenezer in the bible, and we are going to see this again when we study chapter 7, means "stone of help."<sup>ii</sup> It was a stone monument erected to serve as a reminder to God's people of the ways in which God had helped them.

So, the Israelites are in Ebenezer and the Philistines are at Aphek [A-Feck]. These two towns are about 2 miles apart.<sup>iii</sup> The Philistines attacked the Israelites and had a major victory. This is where we begin to see the superstition of the Israelites come to light.

Verse 3. ***3And when the people came to 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 here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies."***

The elders interpreted the defeat as judgment from God. Again, failing to look at the spiritual climate and the failure of Eli's sons, they turn to superstition. What should we do?! Ah! Let's go get the ark of the covenant and it will give us victory.

A couple things about the Ark that's important to know. God instructed His people to build this ark. It was a wooden rectangular box, less than 4 feet long. It was covered with gold. On top of the ark was two winged cherubim facing each other with their wings spread and touching. It formed a seat. Inside of the box were sacred objects. The Ten Commandment tablets, a portion of manna that provided food for the Israelites while they wandered in the wilderness, and it also had Aaron's rod. And the ark of the covenant served as a visible sign of the very presence of God.<sup>iv</sup>

Now, to be fair to the elders here, the ark did have power with it. For example, people were not to touch the ark directly. There are a couple stories where people did touch it, even to keep it from falling, and they died. And also, to be fair, the ark had been used in military victories for the Israelites as they crossed into the Promised Land. But in the case presented in 1 Samuel 4, the elders were more concerned with the superstition of the ark and not in dealing with the sin that was the real issue.

Let's pick back up in verse 4. ***4So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.*** [Not a good mixture. The two guys who were sinful, unrepentant, and the cause of the predicament, are in the presence of God.] ***5As soon as the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded.*** [The Israelites are

trying to recreate the circumstances surrounding the victory at Jericho.] ***6And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, "What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" And when they learned that the ark of the Lord had come to the camp, 7the Philistines were afraid, for they said, "A god has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. 8Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness.*** [The Philistines have obviously heard about the ways God has worked in Israel's history.] ***9Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight."***

What is happening here? Well, the Israelites are trying to manipulate God to come to their rescue. Instead of coming face to face with their spiritual state, they were looking to the ark as some sort of genie in a bottle type thing. You see the superstition here. Now let's look at...

## 2) The Surrender.

The results of turning to superstition were devastating. Let's pick up the story in verse 10. ***10 So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. 11And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.***

What the Israelites tried to turn into a holy war was actually a war against the sin of Eli's sons. A staggering loss of human life. 30,000 soldiers. But more devastating than that was the loss of the ark into the hands of the Philistines, their greatest enemies. And the Israelite army retreated in surrender.

So, we've looked at the superstition and the surrender. Now, let's turn to...

## 3) The Sentence.

It's not enough that Hophni and Phinehas died. Much more happened as a result of spiritual leaders and a nation turning from God.

When the news of the catastrophe reached Shiloh, more devastation occurred. Eli was awaiting an update. The update came and it was increasing heartache. Israel fled, the army suffered heavy losses, your two sons are dead, and the ark of the covenant has been captured. Look what happens.

Verse 12. *12A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day, [20 miles. This dude ran a marathon to bring news to Eli]. with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head. 13When he arrived, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out. 14When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, "What is this uproar?" Then the man hurried and came and told Eli. 15Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set so that he could not see. 16And the man said to Eli, "I am he who has come from the battle; I fled from the battle today." And he said, "How did it go, my son?" 17He who brought the news answered and said, "Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a great defeat among the people. Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured." 18As soon as he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years.*

And just when you think it can't possibly get any worse, it does. Verse 19. *19Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. 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 and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. 20And about the time of her death the women attending her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son." But she did not answer or pay attention. 21And she named the child Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel!" [Ichabod actually means, "Where is glory? Or Nothing of glory. She named him that because she came to the realization of the spiritual state of Israel.] because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. 22And she said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."*

We've seen the superstition, the surrender, and now the sentence for the sins of the leaders. A very sad story. A little bit of a spoiler alert, it gets better. But there are a couple life lessons that are worthy of note for us today. Allow me to mention a couple.

### **LIFE LESSONS:**

Life lesson number one...

#### **1) Choose Relationship over Superstition.**

When the elders of the Israelites brought the ark of the covenant into the battle against the Philistines, their motive was to use it as a weapon. And when they did that, they choose superstition over relationship with God. What was truly needed was repentance from Eli and his sons. That would have been the action that would have demonstrated a relationship with God. But instead, they tried to manipulate God for their own purposes. That's what I mean when I say superstition.

Look back at verse 3. *3And when the people came to 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 here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies."* Circle and underline the word, "it." Do you see that? The Israelites placed their faith in "it," instead of He!v Superstition over relationship.

When we look around our culture, I think we see evidence of people taking a superstitious approach to faith. Think about it for a minute. Don't we at times try to manipulate God to work for our agenda? For example, we have a tendency to think that if we pray more that God will take care of a difficult situation in our life. Or how sometimes the real motivation to give to the needy is to somehow earn more of God's favor. We also strike bargains with God. "God, if You do such and such for me, then I will do this for you." For college students it sounds like this, "God if you help me pass this test, then I will... fill in the blank." Trust me, I've prayed those prayers!

And I'm not saying those are bad things, you understand. What I am trying to say is that there is a fine line in doing things because we love God and doing things to manipulate God. If I'm honest, I am guilty of trying to manipulate God at times in my life, just like the Israelites in 1 Samuel 4. But the difference between superstition and relationship is the heart behind the things we do.

Can God answer our prayers in a dire situation. Yes, and amen! I believe God wants us to pray those prayers. And we saw that in Hannah's prayer. But in Hannah's prayer, it was an expression of a relationship with God, not trying to manipulate Him. It's not your prayer that does anything. It's to Whom you pray.

Does God bless our faithfulness? Yes, and amen! Again, Samuel's parents were faithful to The Lord and God blessed them as a result. But again, their

faithfulness was birthed out of their relationship with God, not trying to get something from Him.

Here's a truth we need to know, beloved. God is not a genie in a bottle that can be manipulated and does what we want Him to do whenever we pray the right prayers or do the right things. God simply cannot be manipulated. And He will always work toward what is best for us and for the Kingdom.

Christianity is the only belief system in the world in which we don't have to try to please and manipulate our God. All other religions dictate when you have to pray, how often you have to attend church, what you have to do in the hopes that someday you've done enough to be forgiven and to please God. Listen, the beauty of Christianity is that Jesus has already done what we could not do, and that pleased God. So, we don't have to worry about that, instead we can enjoy a relationship with God. Therefore, the motivation to do the things we do is not to earn God's favor, you see. We already have that in Christ. The motivation, then, is to do the things we do as a response to the favor God has already shown us!

There are people that, quote "try religion." Have you ever heard that? "Oh, I've tried religion and it doesn't work." Here's the problem with that, it's superstition, not a relationship with God. When we do things with a motivation to manipulate God, or to earn God's favor, we are not relying on a relationship with Him, we are being superstitious. Do you see the difference? And superstition always disappoints us because it's untrue.

I think the danger in approaching faith that way is that we miss Jesus. Don't miss Jesus! When we miss Jesus, we somehow make a relationship with God contingent on our performance. Christianity is not about doing, it's about what Jesus has already done and then what Jesus wants to do in and through you.

Let me put it all into perspective for us. You and I are so sinful that there is nothing we can do to earn our way to Heaven. On my best day, I don't deserve Heaven. If we were to compile all of our best days together, it wouldn't be enough to get one person here into Heaven. It's all about a relationship with Jesus. So, choose relationship over superstition. Second Life Lesson...

## 2) Surrender is a Good Place to Be.

The Israelites leaning more on superstition instead of a relationship with God created a mess. They lost more than 34,000 soldiers in two battles. That's more than the United States lost in the entire War in Afghanistan. They lost every priest as Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas died. They lost the ark of the covenant, the most sacred object! A poor child was named Ichabod. Not a name you want to name your child, parents. The Israelite army ran for their lives. The glory of the Lord had departed Israel. Utter surrender.

You know, sometimes God has to get us to rock bottom before we can see what He has for us. Because when we are rock bottom, we lose trust in ourselves and can begin trusting God. That's why I say surrender is actually a good place to be. When you and I reach the place of surrender, it's only up from there. When we reach the point at which we surrender everything to The Lord, blessings are sure to follow. That's true in our lives and that's true in our church. Have you surrendered, have you given everything to The Lord?

Now, I don't want to steal too much of the thunder from future messages, but what we are going to see is that when Israel reaches rock bottom here and truly surrenders to God, God is going to do some amazing things.

Let me give you an example of what happens when we surrender and when we don't. Think about when Jesus called His disciples. The invitation was to, "Come, follow me." Many of them had to leave everything behind to follow Jesus. They surrendered. And what happened? They got to be in on launching a little thing called church. Surrendering to Jesus is often hard, but the blessing is worth it.

Now, what happens if we don't surrender? Remember the story of the rich young ruler? He asked Jesus what he could do to inherit eternal life. Remember what Jesus told him? Surrender. Surrender everything and follow me. But the rich young ruler couldn't surrender, and he went away sad.

What is it that you need to do to get to a point of surrender in your life? Because I can promise you that it is at that point that you'll begin to see God move in your life. Was the surrender painful for the Israelites? You bet! It was even costly. But where The Lord will take them from here is incredible.

## CONCLUSION:

I'm going to invite the band to come back up and lead us in a time of response.

Perhaps you're here today and the surrender you need to do is to surrender your life to Jesus. The Bible says that we are all sinners. And that sin in our lives separates us from God. But God showed His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Jesus died for us. And when we place our faith and trust in Jesus, when we surrender to Jesus, we are forgiven and our relationship with God is restored. Have you surrendered to Jesus? If not, make today that day.

Secondly, is there something that you are holding onto? Something that the Holy Spirit is whispering to you that you need to give over to Him? You do that.

Are you struggling in some area of your life? Need prayer? We want to invite you to come and allow us to pray with you and over you. [PRAY]

## ENDNOTES:

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<sup>i</sup> Works consulted in preparation for this message: Robert D. Bergen, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Samuel, Vol. 7*, B&H Publishing: Nashville, 1996; Heath Thomas and J.D. Greear, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Samuel*, Holman: Nashville, 2016; Bill T. Arnold, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2003; Enduring Word Commentary, “1 Samuel 4 – Capture of the Ark of the Covenant,” accessed online: <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/1-samuel-4/>; Ray Fowler, “Losing God in Religion,” published by Ray Fowler Ministries, accessed online: <http://www.rayfowler.org/sermons/1-samuel/losing-god-in-religion/>; Skip Heitzig, “Expound: 1 Samuel 2:22-4:22,” message taught at Calvary Church on Wednesday, May 19, 2021, accessed online: <https://calvarynm.church/connectwithskip/teachings/#/series/314/sermon/4571>.

<sup>ii</sup> Strong’s Concordance, 72.

<sup>iii</sup> Robert D. Bergen, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Samuel, Vol. 7*, B&H Publishing: Nashville, 1996, page 90.

<sup>iv</sup> Bill T. Arnold, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2003, pages 94-95.

<sup>v</sup> Pointed out by Ray Fowler.