

1 Samuel 4:21

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[0 : 00] Now let's turn to the passage we read in 1st Samuel chapter 4 and particularly verse 21. 1st Samuel chapter 4 verse 21.

He named the boy Ichabod saying, the glory has departed from Israel because of the capture of the ark of God and the deaths of her father-in-law.

And her husband. We've been reading this evening of one of the great tragic eras in the history of the nation of Israel.

To understand something of what it must have been like to live then, we need only think of some periods in our own Scottish history. We could think of a period like the Battle of Flodden when, as we know, the flower of Scottish nobility and youth were slaughtered at the Battle of Flodden.

And the whole nation was in a state of mourning because of it. The king and many of the finest leaders of the land died there.

[1 : 18] Now that's the kind of feeling, obviously, which people must have had as they heard this news of this great defeat of Israel by the arch enemies, the Philistines.

Now to understand the background to this, we have to understand that the Philistines were the oppressors in this situation. They were trying to dominate Israel.

The Philistines lived on the coastal area and therefore they had the better trade and the better control of much of the resources of the land.

And they used that power that they had to dominate the other nations round about. And they sought especially to dominate Israel, who lived more in the hill country inland in Palestine.

So that is the background. And here we had an attempt by the Israelites to free themselves from the oppression of the Philistines. And yet it ended miserably, as we read.

[2 : 24] But of course, there is much more to this story than merely an account of a battle or series of battles involving two nations, such as we might get looking back in our own history between Scotland and England and other wars and battles like that.

There's something much more involved because we're dealing here not just with history. We are dealing with history. And that has to be stressed. We're dealing with real people in real situations.

But we're dealing with something more because here we are dealing with a history in which God was vitally involved. The history of the people of Israel was a special history because Israel was a special nation.

God had revealed himself particularly to Abraham and to his grandson Jacob and to the people of Israel descended from them.

Revealed himself for a particular purpose because he had the plan, the purpose of bringing of that people, people of Israel, maybe that very unlikely people, who for hundreds of years were slaves in Egypt, bringing from them the Messiah, the appointed king, who would be king of kings and lord of lords.

[3 : 59] And that is why the history of Israel is so important because God was at work with that nation, teaching them what manner of God he is, teaching them how they were to worship him, teaching them what they were to expect of this man that was promised who was going to come.

So the things that happened to Israel are not only of interest as the history of every other nation is of interest, but it's of particular interest because here God was at work dealing with the people.

And we can learn a great deal from what happens in the Old Testament for ourselves so today. The Apostle Paul puts it quite simply in these words. He says what happened to them was an example for us.

We can learn from that because God does not change. Some of his ways of dealing with men have changed in certain ways.

For instance, he doesn't now deal specially with one nation of people. But God himself does not change. He hasn't become any less holy. He hasn't become any more tolerant of sin.

[5 : 14] He hasn't become any more or less loving than what he was in Old Testament times. And that's something that people forget as they try falsely to oppose the Old Testament against the New and so on.

God remains the same. And a lot of what we can learn from the Old Testament concerns his dealing with his people who fail to learn what he is teaching them.

And he has to teach them, we might say, he had to teach them the hard way. And a lot of the history of Israel, both of individuals within it and of the nation of a whole, is God teaching his people the hard way.

And there are many hard things in the Old Testament. It's not a book that's pretty to read. It's a book that's full of battles and struggles.

It's full of disappointments. It's full of tragedies. But it's full of real life. And of God dealing with real people. And when people don't listen to God and say, I don't want to go your way, I want to go my way.

[6 : 24] God does not let them go. God holds everyone accountable. And when he's dealing with his people, he deals with them sometimes the hard way to bring them to their senses and to bring them back to himself.

Now that works with individual people. Individual people who are believers in God, who are Christians. God disciplines those whom he loves. But it works also with groups of people, with churches, with nations.

If God doesn't work with a group of people or a church or a nation, there may be times of discipline and times of hardness to be gone through if we fail to listen to what God is saying to us.

So then let's turn to this passage and see what we can learn from what happened to the people of Israel at that moment of history. All of this began not just because of an oppression of the Israelites by the Philistines.

There was something even more important at work within the people of Israel itself. And that was, it began with the fact that some, and we know particularly the sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, they despised God.

[7 : 46] And they despised his form of worship that he had revealed to them. And that he committed specifically to them as the sons of the priests.

We read in chapter 2 and from verse 12, that Eli's sons were wicked men. They had no regard for the Lord. And we read some of the things that they did.

Totally disregarding the regulations that God had laid down concerning the sacrifice and the ritual connected with it, which to us may seem rather boring and uninteresting.

But each item of that law revealed concerning sacrifice was revealing something concerning the character of God, something concerning atonement for sin, or something concerning his provision for men.

Each detail was important. Hophni and Phinehas despised these details. They weren't concerned about the fact that God had set here a living testimony to the fact that through the great atoning work of Christ, he was going to provide for the life and fellowship of men who would believe in him.

[9 : 01] They weren't concerned about these great spiritual lessons. So to them, all the sacrifices were important for was their own riches and their own benefit.

How much they could get out of it. What they could get out of this sacrificial system. And already God had made provision for the priests within that system.

And so we read in verse 17, This sin of the young men was very great in the Lord's sight, for they were treating the Lord's offering with contempt. Now the second part of that verse, it can very well be understood to refer not only to Hophni and Phinehas.

It very well can be referring to people in general. When it says they were treating the Lord's offering with contempt. Obviously, Hophni and Phinehas were doing that.

But it seemed that their sin was even more heinous and more hateful in God's sight. Because they were bringing the whole system of worshipping God into disrepute by their sin and their disregard of his law.

[10 : 13] And that gives us some inkling as to how bad things had become. Because people thought, Well, if that's what the priests are, if that's what they're like, if they're only out for themselves and what they can get out of this religion, well, this religion isn't worth having.

What's the point of all this sacrifice? And so the whole worth of religion, the whole worth of believing in God and practicing what God had commanded was lowered, it was lowered right down to the gutter in the society of that time.

And of course, that continues to be the same ever since. If the leaders of the Christian church are not respected throughout a society, then the whole of the gospel and the whole of Christianity is brought into disrepute.

And how can people have respect for Christianity today when so many of the so-called leaders of Christianity who are reputed to be the leaders, who are quoted by the media, are so obviously disregarding the Lord's sacrifice, so obviously thinking nothing of the great fundamentals of the Christian faith, that is the life and the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

What else can it be called but holding the Lord's offering, the Lord's sacrifice in contempt? And that is what is proceeding in our own day.

[11 : 50] Is it any wonder then that in general, the whole question of what Christianity is and what real Christianity is, is so disregarded by people at large.

This was the origin of what took place on that terrible and tragic day when Israel were defeated. The fact that there was growing within Israel this despising of God and particularly despising of his sacrifice.

And that ought to be a great warning to ourselves, not just concerning church men and church leaders, not just concerning what's happening in our society at large, but what our attitude is towards the gospel of Christ.

What is our attitude towards the sacrificial death of Christ? Because it's not a matter of unimportance. It's not a matter that you can just write off.

It is the greatest question that you have to decide upon in life. And it is going to influence your own personal history. It's going to influence your own personal destiny in a way in which most other decisions in life are not going to influence your destiny.

[13 : 12] Decisions that we might think are quite important. Decisions that we might think are vital. Things concerning our careers, things concerning our homes, things concerning the things we own, our money, our prosperity.

All these decisions, though important in their own field, none of these decisions will decide what our future history and our future destiny is to be.

But this decision, what think ye of Christ? This decision concerning what our attitude towards Christ sacrifices? That question is the most important of all.

Because on our attitude to Jesus, our attitude to his finished work on the cross, we will be judged. What have we done with Christ?

What have we decided concerning him? God gave his own son to remove the sins of the world. And he invites people freely to come and to believe in Jesus Christ.

[14 : 16] Of their sins cast away and forgotten and to be received into the family of God. God has announced it. God has invited us. What is our response? It's on that great decision that our destiny depends.

And that is why it's so important that that message is proclaimed and ought to be proclaimed from every pulpit in this land and ought to be proclaimed by every Christian throughout our society.

Because it is on that great fact that our destiny lies. So then, the question is, what's our attitude to the Lord's offering, the Lord's sacrifice?

Are we maybe guilty of treating it with contempt? Of not treating this question with the seriousness it deserves? Are we hearing these things and passing them over?

Thinking them unimportant compared to other decisions that you may have to make? Other matters that may be in your mind just now? Are you treating it even worse than that? Something like the contempt with which some of these people treated it?

[15 : 22] Either like the people who were observing what Hophni and Phinehas were doing and were saying, oh well, there's all this hypocrisy in religion.

How can I accept it when there's all of that? You're not asked, my friend, to decide on the basis of the hypocrisy of others. You're asked to decide upon the basis of what God says in his word and what God's invitation is to you.

We can always look at other people. We can always look at what happens within the so-called church of Christ. and we can always find forward because there is not one man, there is not one woman within that church who is perfect.

And I defy you to find any person that you would not be able to criticize in the church of Christ because every one of us, we are sinners saved by grace.

And it's not to us that you must look or to any other person within the church, but it is to the Lord Jesus Christ what think ye of him. Let us not be guilty of treating the Lord's sacrifice with contempt.

[16 : 34] But then, secondly, they were displeased with God. They despised God, that's how it all began. But then they were displeased with God.

In chapter 4 and verse 3, we see this coming out. This was after their initial battle against the Philistines.

When the soldiers returned to the camp, the elders of Israel asked, why did the Lord bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines? They had set out on what seemed to be a great enterprise, a worthy enterprise, to free their people from the oppression of the Philistines.

And yet they were defeated. And instead of thinking what was wrong within the people of Israel themselves, like Joshua had to do after their defeat at Ai, and they had to find out where was their sin in the people of Israel.

Instead of doing that, their question was, why did the Lord bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines? They weren't concerned about looking to themselves and to see what might be wrong within themselves, but they were just saying, well, God has caused it, and we're sort of blaming him for what's happened.

[18 : 10] They even go so far as we'll see in a minute of thinking that it was something perhaps to do with the form of religion that he had given to them, that it wasn't just quite proper and they were going to sort it out, they were going to do better.

But you see, the implication of what they were saying was that when they suffered a setback, well, they blamed God for it. Now, we've got to be careful in how we actually treat what they say here because the Bible clearly reveals to us, as in this passage, as one instance of it, that God is indeed in control of every event that takes place, and nothing happens without his permission.

God indeed allowed them to be defeated there that day. God indeed was in control of all the historical events leading up to that situation so that it was brought about.

It was certain that they would be defeated. Yet, as part and parcel of that process of events leading up to that defeat was the very crucial element of Israel's sin.

And that was what they ought to have directed their attention to, not simply looking upon the true doctrine of the sovereignty of God as a kind of excuse so that they could say, well, the Lord has caused it, and we've got to try to do something about this to try to change what the Lord has given to us to make it better.

[19 : 40] Instead of doing that, they should have looked to themselves and seen what had brought about this disaster. And isn't that, of course, the very thing that we are so slow at doing as sinful human beings?

when we are presented with what God says and when we consider our own lives and when perhaps we suffer a setback and things go wrong in our lives, we don't draw the proper conclusions, the ones that God is wanting us to draw.

We draw wrong conclusions. We think, oh, well, it must be God's fault. God is against us for some particular reason that we don't know God is against us.

And perhaps we think, well, what we've learned or understood from the Bible, that can't be true. We've got to change that. We've got to have something better, something more fitting for ourselves, something perhaps that will fit more in with our way of thinking rather than what God has said.

When we suffer setbacks in whatever area of life, we ought first and foremost to consider what is God teaching us here? what is God teaching us?

[20 : 58] Now, that can apply to many different areas of life. It can apply to the spiritual area as we think of it. Things like, perhaps we may feel that we're not getting anywhere in our spiritual lives.

We may feel that we're not learning what God is teaching us in the Bible. we're not becoming the kind of people that we ought to be if we're following Christ.

That should drive us to discover what is God really teaching us? Where perhaps are we going wrong? It can apply to other areas in life. Things like illness and sickness.

For we should never say that illness or sickness is directly caused by any particular sin of ours, yet it's right and proper that we should consider what is God teaching us in this?

He's bringing us to a position where we realize our own weakness and our own inability to affect our environment and to do things that perhaps we would like to do.

[22 : 01] He's reminding us of our weakness. What has he got to teach us in this? Perhaps we suffer some kind of tragedy, some kind of bereavement, something like this.

Again, our question ought to be what is God teaching us? Not simply a shrug of the shoulders and saying, well, God has done it. What can we do about it?

But saying, what is God teaching us? God has brought us up short here. God has brought us to a standstill. God has made us think here. What is he wanting us to think about?

Is he wanting us to think about our frailty, our foolishness, the shortness of our time here, the greatness of eternity? Of course, he's wanting us to think about all these things.

There's a purpose in what God is doing. That ought to be our attitude instead of that of the Israelites here who were displeased with God and his way of working with them.

[23 : 01] When the Christian church today suffers so many setbacks, when we look at the church today in society and we see it to be so weak and so seemingly ineffective in comparison to what it was in the past, are we driven to the Lord and to ask him what is he teaching us by these things?

Or are we in general driven on more and more to our own ideas and to compromising with the world and echoing what the world is saying, trying to please people? Well, of course, if we're engaged in that line, we're displeased with what God has revealed.

We're displeased with the Bible and we're trying to present another gospel that will please people. That is not the response he's wanting. The response he's wanting is to drive us back to himself and to ask him, where have we gone wrong?

Where have we gone wrong? Where have we disregarded your word? And that question ought to come to ourselves too as a church and as a denomination. What is God teaching us today?

For now, we have to recognize that our own church is just as weak and just as seemingly ineffective as all the other churches and we have to ask, what is God teaching us?

[24 : 16] Where have we gone wrong? Have we got simply an outward respect for orthodoxy and for the truth of the gospel and we haven't really got a zealous and a true love for the Lord Jesus Christ and the desire to serve him?

Where have we gone wrong? God is teaching us something by these things. To drive us to ask him what is wrong and to ask him to show us from his word where we are to be put right.

Then, thirdly, they were delighted in the form of religion. Verses 3 to 5. Let us bring the ark of the Lord's covenant from Shiloh so that it may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies.

So the people sent men to Shiloh and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the Lord Almighty who is enthroned between the cherubim. And Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of the Lord.

They realized, of course, that something was wrong. Something was badly wrong. But they were not driven to find out where they themselves were wrong.

[25 : 39] But they were driven to alter the pattern of what God had revealed to them in Scripture. And instead of coming to God, instead of coming to God and asking his guidance, asking his help, they took the form of religion through which God had revealed himself.

And they made of this form what was important so that they thought that by having the ark of the covenant, they thought that by having after all what was just a wooden box covered in gold, carried on poles, if they had that with them as they went out to battle against the Philistines, then everything would be all right.

In other words, they delighted in the form of religion. They had all the respect for the outward forms, but they had no true religion of the soul.

They had no real desire to know what God was teaching them and to listen to what God had to say. They had a superstitious faith in the externals of religion.

They thought that simply by having that wooden box with them, because it was called the ark of the covenant, that they were going to be all right. But after all, how could they be defeated?

[27 : 02] How could that ark be taken captive? Because it was God's, it was the Lord's, and he dwelt there, he revealed himself there. How could it be? That was their reasoning. And that is a very serious warning to us also, because there is a tremendous temptation, all this has been and always will be, to make the externals of religion the important thing.

And that we think if we have these externals, then we're going to be all right. Whatever those externals may be, we think that simply by being in some way connected with the church, in some way being belonging to families who are Christians, or in some way by maybe attendance at the church now and again, that we're having some kind of way by which God will be interested in us and God will be favorable towards us.

We think that maybe because we were baptized, then because of that in itself, we're going to be all right with God.

And we could go on and on listing the many things that people may regard in some kind of superstitious way to be important in winning God's favor.

The religion revealed in scripture is not concerned with any of those things. All of these things are clearly revealed to be types or pictures or if you like visual aids to help us to understand what God is really desiring.

[28 : 49] All the external things we may take of the Old Testament, external things like the ritual system of sacrifice and all the ritual law connected with it, these things were given to teach people what God was going to do in Christ, how he was going to atone for sin and how he was going to provide eternal life for people.

It was concerning that real, true, spiritual message. The same today. God's concern is not with the externals of church buildings, nor even with the externals of even the sacraments themselves, although so important in communicating to us the vitals of the faith, that we have faith in Christ.

God is not primarily concerned with these things. What he is concerned about is that we would know the central spiritual truth of the gospel of Christ, that we would have a vital living relationship with him, that we wouldn't just be content to sit in a church building hearing the word of God, that we would never be content until we come to know that one of whom the gospel speaks, until we know him ourselves personally as our own Lord and Savior.

That is what God is asking of us, not any kind of superstitious interest in the things of God.

He wants nothing less than that real, vital relationship, and nothing less will do, because it is only by ourselves coming personally to Christ that we are saved.

[30 : 39] And then, of course, we know that because of all of this, they were defeated. In verses 9 and 10, we have a description of that. We have the attitude, first of all, of the Philistines, 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, Hothni and Phinehas, died. There we have a very brief summary of the tragedy of this great defeat that befell Israel.

But the point is, first of all, that the action they took had the exact opposite effect of what they desired. They thought that by carrying the ark of the Lord out into battle, they were going to terrify their enemies, and they were going to overpower them.

Well, it certainly terrified the Philistines, but it had the opposite effect. They said, nothing like this has ever happened to us before. We've got our backs up against the wall now, lads.

[31 : 56] We're going to fight as we've never fought before, and we're going to defeat them, and that's exactly what happened. You see, all the best and wisest wisdom of man is frail and foolish at the best of times.

The Israelites thought that they were taking the very best action, but it was not, because it was human wisdom, and it was against the whole purpose of what God had revealed.

And so it was demonstrated to be utterly foolish, and it had the opposite effect of what he intended. Now, of course, our misinterpretations, willful or otherwise, of what God is saying to us through the scriptures, these superstitious regards that we have been referring to, and these kinds of things, we think that they may be winning us favor with God, we think that they may be helping us, but in fact, God is saying it's exactly the opposite, that having the opposite effect.

We may think that by this merely outward regard for religion, that then we're not only in some way pleasing God, but we're actually protecting ourselves against spiritual evil, that somehow we're saying, well, we're not really on the side of the devil, we're really on the side of God.

And all the time the devil is laughing, because the devil knows that any such superstitious regard is no protection against him, and that he has us in the hollow of his hand.

[33 : 34] He knows exactly that we are his, and he knows that that kind of superstitious regard is no kind of protection against all his wiles and his powers.

There is only one thing, that defeats that enemy. There is only one thing that has defeated all the powers of darkness, and that is the cross of Jesus Christ. It is only there that they have been defeated, and it's only at the feet of Jesus Christ that all the powers of this world and all the unseen powers of the universe are laid bare and laid powerless.

And it is only there that we can have victory over the power of sin and of evil. And so we're reminded by that great defeat of Israel of where that wrong thinking led, and what a great tragedy it led to.

And so finally we just note in the words of the verse we looked at at the beginning, the departed glory of Israel. Israel in verse 21, she named the boy Ichabod.

The glory has departed from Israel. Ichabod meaning no glory. And this was the final summing up in a very dramatic way of that great tragedy.

[35 : 00] Think of the tragedy of that family. Think of poor Eli. Eli surely is a man that we must have great sympathy for because here was a man who was really a good man, a man who served God.

And yet he, out of a wrong regard for the welfare of his sons, he did not really control them and rebuke them and then discipline them as he ought to have done.

But rather he allowed them to go on. Although he maybe spoke a word here and again to them to remonstrate with them, he did nothing to actually stop their evil.

And he had that power to do it. And so we come eventually to the great tragedy that when he hears the news that his sons have been killed in battle and finally that the Ark of the Lord has been taken captive, then it is too much for the old man, 98 years old, and he falls over backward and he breaks his neck and dies.

Now, that is a summary of the tragedy of that situation. Here was someone who was not at all a holy evil like Hophni and Phinehas seemed to be, but someone who was concerned for the welfare of religion in Israel, someone who was concerned about the Ark of the Lord, someone who was fearful about what was happening that day.

[36 : 34] He was waiting to see what was happening. But because he had not taken control of things in his own hands and because he had not dealt with things as he ought to have done, there is this tragic ending to his life as far as this world is concerned.

And then we have the tragedy also of that child being born, a child being born into this tragic family, a child being born whose grandfather had just died and whose father had died in battle.

And this child being born to a mother who was also in the process of dying. And the name she gave him sums it all up. No glory, the glory has departed from Israel.

Now, the Old Testament has got several of these great tragedies described. And they're not just interesting in the sense that maybe a Greek tragedy might be interesting and moving or in the way that, say, a historical tragedy out of our own history may be very moving like the story of Flooden and the Song of Flowers of the Forest.

They are to move us in a certain direction. They are to cause us to think. What is the meaning of this history? What is God teaching us by these things?

[38 : 00] Here we are being reminded of things that are sad, things that are tragic, things that are heart-rending, things that we know happen in this life, things that have happened in the history of Israel, in the history of Scotland, in personal histories of people here.

We are being told that there is tragedy. And that tragedy is there in this world because of man's rebellion against God. And wherever man continues to rebel against God, there continues to be tragedy.

And the ultimate tragedy in man's rebellion against God is the tragedy of hell, where all those most evil nightmares become ultimate reality in separation from God, from the God of all love and all hope.

We are being reminded here that there is indeed no glory and no hope in man's own rebellious way. The glory is in the grace of God and in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The glory is in that towards which the Ark of the Covenant pointed. And that is the fact of God dwelling with men through the work of atonement.

[39 : 20] Because that is what the Ark of the Covenant was. It was the place where the blood of atonement was sprinkled. And it was saying that that is where God dwelt with his people. And that is when God was pleased to live with people.

When they came through the blood of the Lamb. And that is what we're being told tonight. That the glory of God and the grace of God is expressed supremely in that great work of salvation in Jesus Christ.

And tonight every one of us is being invited to believe in that Lord and that Savior. And to recognize that he alone has done everything necessary for our salvation.

To save us from all the powers of darkness and evil and temptation and sin. And to bring us into the glory, the unspeakable glory of heaven in the very presence of God and his angels.

And in that great new universe in which righteousness dwells. That perfect environment for which man was created. And only those who know Christ will ever enjoy.

[40 : 27] So tonight you are invited to come to believe in that Savior and that gospel and to know that hope and that salvation. Come because not only am I inviting you but the Lord Jesus is inviting you tonight personally and he's inviting you to that salvation and that peace.

let us pray. Amen. Amen. Oh our gracious Lord we thank you that you are the God of all history and nothing happens in this world outside of your control.

We thank you Lord that we may learn from these events of history. The tragic ones as well as the happy ones. And we pray Lord that we indeed would so learn to know that you are the God the sovereign God who controls this universe.

And there is in the ultimate sense no escape from you. Gracious Lord enable us to seek you and find you now. To seek you and find you now in the peace and in the love of the gospel.

To respond to that invitation. so that we will not one day be found by you in utter nakedness and tragedy and in sadness and sorrow when we realize that it is too late and we do not know you and we hear only the fearful words depart from me.

[42 : 00] I never knew you. Oh Lord we ask that you would enable each one of us to regard this greatest of all decisions and this greatest of all invitations as the most fundamental and the most important thing that we can ever think upon.

We pray that you would help us to fill our thoughts with this life. With this message of salvation. With this gospel.

May we know the God of the gospel that is revealed in Christ. Enable us to know Christ. And to live with him.

And to live for him. We ask it in his name and for his sake. Amen.