

1 Samuel 4

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[0:00] What's in a name?

That's the question that Juliet asks Romeo in the famous balcony scene in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. She knows that Romeo is a Montague and her family are the Capulets and those families hate each other.

They would never agree to them being married. So Juliet asks the question, what's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

So Romeo would, were not he Romeo called, retain that dear perfection which he owes without that title, Romeo, doff thy name and for that name which is no part of thee take all myself.

Get rid of your name, Romeo. Romeo. Romeo. That's the only thing that keeps us apart. What matters is who you are, not what your name is.

[1:16] Now that's an idea that probably most of us would agree with. In fact, in our culture names are pretty unimportant things. We choose names for our kids because we like how they sound.

Or because a beloved celebrity named their own child that. Maybe we'll look up the meaning of a name in a baby book to figure out what it means, but maybe not.

It doesn't really matter that much. But in the cultures of the Bible, names often meant something a little bit more. That's why the Bible often tells us what specific names mean.

So for instance, God renames Abram, Abraham. That means father of many nations. God is reinforcing his promises to Abraham. The name is meant to reinforce some truth about God or about his plan.

Other times, names are ways of remembering. So Sarah names her son Isaac, which means he laughs. His mother, Isaac's mother Sarah, remembered her own sarcastic, unbelieving laughter when told that she would have a child at an advanced age.

[2:25] And she also remembers her joyful laughter when she actually became a mother of a son. Just by calling Isaac to come in for dinner, she would be reminding herself of God's kindness in the face of her disbelief.

Well, on Sunday evenings, we've been working our way through the book of 1 Samuel. And the opening chapters of 1 Samuel actually give us the meanings of two names.

And both are of the reminding sort. Hannah, a faithful woman who, like Sarah, desperately wanted a son, names her baby boy Samuel, which means asked of God. It's a reminder of God's ability and, in fact, willingness to answer prayers and to bless his people.

And then we come to 1 Samuel 4, a text in which a dying woman names her newborn son Ichabod, which means there is no glory, for God's glory had departed from Israel.

It's a tragic story. And not only because a little boy had to go through life named Ichabod. This, in fact, is one of the lowest moments in the history of God's people, a history full of low moments.

[3 : 35] And we're going to read it together. You'll find 1 Samuel 4 on page 228 of the Bibles provided for you if you're following along. If you're new to the Bible, the big numbers on the page are the chapter numbers, the small numbers are the verse numbers.

We'll read 1 Samuel 4 in its entirety. Listen to me as I read 1 Samuel 4. Now the word of God, and the word of God, pardon me, 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. The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about 4,000 men on the field of battle.

And when the troops 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.

So the people sent to Shiloh, and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who was enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

[4 : 43] As 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. And 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, the 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. Woe 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. Take courage and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you. Be men and fight.

So the Philistines fought. And Israel was defeated, and they fled every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. And the ark of God was captured.

And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died. A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the next day with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head.

[5 : 46] When 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. When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, What is this uproar?

Then the man hurried and came and told Eli. Now Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes were set so that he could not see. And 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? He who brought the news answered and said, Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has been a great defeat among the people. Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured.

As 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. Now 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 the pains came upon her. And about the time of her death, the woman attending her said to her, Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son.

[6:57] But she did not answer or pay attention. And she named the child Ichabod, saying, The glory has departed from Israel, because the ark of God has 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. Now if you've been coming regularly to these Sunday evening sermons, you've heard sermons on the first three chapters of the book of 1 Samuel.

Let's very quickly review what happens. At the beginning of 1 Samuel, we meet Hannah, a weeping woman, praying to God to have a child. And God hears her prayers, and Hannah has a son named Samuel.

Hannah devotes him to the Lord, takes him to be raised in the tabernacle, the place where God's people came to worship, and Samuel grows up there under the supervision of Eli, the priest we've just met in 1 Samuel 4.

We learn that God has chosen Samuel to be a prophet, to lead the people and teach them how to follow God. And the people need the help. All of Israel is in a chaos.

[8:03] Their leaders are ineffective and corrupt. Even the priests in the temple, the sons of Eli, are abusing their power and abusing the people under their care. God will eventually use Samuel to show the people a new way, but we're not there yet in 1 Samuel 4.

In fact, 1 Samuel 4 is the time when the people of God hit absolute rock bottom. The glory of the Lord departs from Israel. Now, I wonder if any of you have ever had that experience of hitting rock bottom.

Probably most of us can think of times when we've had our greatest hopes stripped away, when we've been stuck and not seen a way out. Times when we've had to take a hard look at ourselves and not liked what we've seen.

Times when we've felt all alone in this world. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul describes this as being without hope and without God in the world. What did you do in that situation?

Maybe you're there right now. What are you doing? Did you turn to God? If so, what did that look like? Well, I think perhaps as we look at 1 Samuel 4, we can come up with some ideas about how Christians, people who have known their God in Christ, can act when they reach rock bottom.

[9:27] Our story in 1 Samuel 4 begins with a crisis. The people of Israel are at war with the Philistines. And in 1 Samuel, it seems like the people of Israel are always at war with the Philistines.

The Philistines were basically the Klingons of the Old Testament. They were a warlike, technologically advanced people who lived very near the Israelites and were always fighting.

And 1 Samuel 4 opens with the Israelites and Philistine armies drawn up for battle, facing each other. And the first battle does not go well at all.

4,000 men die in the Israeli army. And there's no reason to think that the second one will go any better. The future looks bleak. This is a crisis. What is Israel to do? Well, not surprisingly, they turn their minds to God.

God had given them great military victories before when they were hopelessly outmatched. Perhaps he would do the same again. Look at verse 3. These leaders, we don't know much about them, but they seem to have understood that God was in control.

[10:46] They say actually that it was not the Philistines who defeated them in that first battle, but it was God. If they want a victory in the next one, the Lord is going to have to do it. So they come up with a plan.

They'll bring the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord into the camp, and that surely will guarantee them a victory. Now, the Ark of the Covenant was a wooden box covered in gold.

And inside it held the Ten Commandments that Moses received from God. And on the top, it had two golden angels or cherubim with outstretched wings. It was the place in which God was enthroned.

It was a symbol of God's presence. And normally, it always stayed in the tent where God's people would come to worship. It functions something like God's throne. Now, the people knew that God was a spirit.

He didn't have a body or a specific location. But he had chosen to make himself known in the people in that particular place. The Ark of the Covenant was the sign of God's presence among his people.

[11:48] And these elders, these leaders thought that maybe if you brought the Ark into the camp, you would bring the power of God with it. The soldiers of Israel seemed to think the same thing. They cheered so loud that the earth shook when the Ark arrived.

Surely now, victory was at hand. Even the Philistines thought this. They trembled when they heard the news. How could they possibly defeat a mighty God who had already defeated the Egyptians, the superpower of the ancient world?

Woe 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. They're a little bit fuzzy on the details of the Exodus.

But they've heard rumors about it. And they think that the only thing they can do is fight desperately and hope for victory. Well, what's so wrong with the perspective of Israel here?

I mean, clearly we're not meant to approve of these actions. The Israelites suffer a terrible defeat. But this doesn't sound all bad. I mean, the people of Israel are recognizing that they can't win this victory on their own.

[12:55] That sounds pretty humble. They know that they need God's help. That sounds pretty admirable. What's so bad about this?

Well, the people of Israel, God's own people, have put God in a box. In this case, a literal box made of wood and overlaid in it with gold.

The Philistines are ignorant. They don't know anything but rumors about God. They think that the ark itself is a god. That's not true. It's just a box and a symbol of God's promises and his presence.

The ark was never meant to be a god. But God's people have roughly the same attitude. If we move the ark, we move God too. We can get God to do what we want if we just bring along his ark.

This golden box is the key to getting what we want. They don't actually turn to God and ask for help at all. They say the ark will save us. But the ark can't save anyone.

[14:01] Now, I imagine that most of you have seen the movie Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark. Oddly enough, it's the same plot as 1 Samuel 4. In that movie, the Nazis find the ark and they have the same idea.

They think that if they can take the ark and march with it in front of their armies, they will be impossible to defeat. Victory will be theirs. They'll be invincible. Now, it doesn't work out that way for them either.

It doesn't work out that way for the Nazis. In the movies, it never does. It doesn't work out that way for the people of Israel. Even if you read on later, you'll find that the Philistines learn the same lesson the hard way.

They think that they can master God by controlling the ark. And that's just not the case. What are you really trusting when you're in crisis?

Are you looking for a God that you can control? A God you can manipulate? Powers that you can deploy at will to serve your agenda?

[15:04] Yeah. It's a very human thing to do. I study history. I remember a year or two ago reading about villagers in medieval Spain who, when worried about an oncoming plague or perhaps locusts or a bad harvest, would make a contract with their local saints.

They would go to the statues of the saints with a notary. They would write out a contract saying that if you save us from this plague or if you help us to bring in a good harvest, saint, we will perform these acts of honor and homage.

Sometimes it worked out and they would do that. They would go before the statue afterwards and give offerings. Sometimes the saints didn't come through and the people would actually take the statues into the town square and whip them to punish the saints for not fulfilling their end of the bargain.

Now that seems ridiculous. But you can see the attraction. Those were supernatural forces that you could control. A world that you could control.

It's actually pretty easy for all of us to trust in things related to God. Things we think have something to do with God without ever actually trusting in God. Maybe we trust in clean living and a strict moral code.

[16:22] Well those are godly things, right? I can, by living a certain way, I can control my circumstances. Or maybe we trust in our church membership or our good deeds. These are all good things.

But not if they become ways that we try to control God and manipulate him into doing the things we want. God calls for obedience. He calls for us to trust him.

Not to try to manipulate him. These opening chapters of 1 Samuel introduce a contrast. On the one, there are the corrupt and selfish leaders of Israel.

The worst are Eli's sons. They abuse their positions for profit. They abuse the people under their authority. They use God for their own personal agenda.

For their own purposes. And on the other hand, we have Hannah and Samuel. Faithful, humble Hannah who trusts God to provide for her. And trusts him to keep his promises.

[17:20] An obedient Samuel who follows instructions and does whatever God commands. Now, both of these parties are men and women. But the key difference is how they think about God.

Is God a source of profit? Or a power to be manipulated? Or is God the king whom we trust and obey?

And 1 Samuel 4 ultimately presents us with that question. How do you think about God? Well, this was a dark day for Israel.

It was a terrific military defeat. God's priests were dead. And worst of all, the ark was captured and taken away into a foreign land. Look again at 1 Samuel 4, 19.

Now his, that's Eli the high priest's. Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phineas, was pregnant and about to give birth. When she heard the news that the ark of God was captured. And that her father-in-law and her husband were dead.

[18:27] She bowed and gave birth. For her pains came upon her. And 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.

And 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. Eli's daughter-in-law gives birth to a son and calls him Ichabod. Meaning, where is the glory? For the glory of God had departed from Israel.

This is an amazing response. We don't know much about her other than this. But we know that her husband had just been killed. Along with her father-in-law. And thousands of her countrymen. We know that she's in labor.

And is about to die. And she doesn't seem to be thinking about any of these things. Ichabod. The glory has departed from Israel. That's just another way of saying that God himself has departed from Israel.

[19:33] That's what she thinks about in this desperate hour. That the God who had chosen his people. And brought them out of slavery in Egypt. The God who had led them safely through desert lands.

Into a new home flowing with milk and honey. That God has now at long last left his people. With the ark in the hands of the Philistines.

The people of God could no longer say that God dwelt with them. Now it's important that we put this story in context. In later chapters we learn that God doesn't stay away very long.

The Philistines think that they have embarrassed Israel. And Israel's God. So they'll take the ark. And they'll put it in the temple of their God Dagon. To demonstrate the victory. But God won't be mocked.

He humiliates this false God Dagon. He sends a plague through the Philistine cities. And pretty soon they're doing whatever they can possibly think of. To get rid of this ark. They just want him gone.

[20:31] And the ark comes back to Israel. In fact God never stops caring for his people. He never abandons them. Even though they had been more interested in using him than in knowing him.

He remained faithful. He was always at work. The book of 1 Samuel repeatedly demonstrates God's goodness. In the face of the people's faithlessness. But even if this removal is temporary.

It's serious. In the Bible the most terrible thing that can happen to you isn't the loss of a loved one. It's not war or famine or disease. It's to be alienated from God.

To be separate from him. The worst thing that could possibly happen to you is for his presence to leave you because of your sin.

I wonder if that's the way that you and I think about God's presence. Is that the thing that we crave the most? The thing we'll work the hardest to keep?

[21:33] What would it be like for you to fall under this judgment? The glory of the Lord has departed. We don't want to minimize what happens here to the people of Israel.

I mean this text for Samuel 4 is a vivid picture of what happens when sin creates distance between God and man. And this happens all throughout the Bible. It starts with Adam and Eve when they're expelled from the garden.

Expelled from God's presence because of their sin. Israel is sent repeatedly into exile because of sin. For all of us, this is our story. Sin drives us into personal exile.

Away from God's presence. We feel distant and estranged. Even worse, we worry that we might be separated from his mercy. We worry that we might be without God and without hope in the world.

Well, 1 Samuel is actually a book all about kings. God will eventually send kings to lead his people. Those kings will fail again and again. But they'll point their way to a king that doesn't fail.

[22 : 40] But today we're far removed from the events of 1 Samuel. What does this mean for us? What should you do when you feel distant from God? Well, we know that we can't master him.

We can't force him to dwell with us. He must come to us. And he does. He has. Nick mentioned that today is the first Sunday of Advent.

It's the Sunday when we traditionally, Christians, have begun thinking about the incarnation of Christ. The coming of God. It's also the time when the Christmas shopping season starts.

So if you haven't started, you're already behind. I'm not sure how I feel about that aspect of Christmas taking over more and more of the year. But it's certainly worth remembering the moment in time when God came to dwell with his people forever.

In Isaiah 7, there's a prophecy that the virgin would conceive and she would have a son and call him Emmanuel. And in Matthew 1, we're told what that name means.

[23 : 48] It means God with us. That's a name that Jesus Christ will never give up. God himself took on our humanity and lived with us.

God himself died for our sins. So that by simply trusting in him and turning away from our selfishness, we might always dwell with him. We might always have him with us.

The message of Christmas. The message of Christ. The message of the whole Bible. Is that we actually never need be alone or distant from God. So if you feel distant from God and you feel alone.

Don't fill your mind with distractions. Don't gorge on television or food. Be quiet. Reflect.

Learn the lesson that God has for you. God does at times withdraw from us. In order to remind us of our need for him. If you're a Christian.

[24 : 53] Remember what your life was like before you knew Christ. When you were without God. And without hope in the world. If you're not a Christian. Or maybe you're just not sure.

Take an honest account. Of your own needs. And your own shortcomings. We all of us have greater enemies. Than Philistines to fight. We have our own sin and selfishness.

We have the world. The flesh and the devil. And apart from Christ. On our own. Our defeat will be more terrible. Than anything Israel ever faced. But we don't have to fall.

Under this judgment. We can know God forever. In Christ. Emmanuel. God with us. So let's learn this lesson.

As quickly as we can. Let's remember that God is not ours to manipulate or control. He is the Lord of history. We are at his mercy. But he is merciful.

[25 : 53] He will not abandon us or forsake us. Certainly not forever. And then when you've reminded yourself of your need for God. Look to Christ. Remember that God has already made his will towards you known.

By sending his son to dwell with you forever. God with us. With us now. And with us always. If we'll trust in him. Let's pray.

God we recognize what a terrible thing it is.

To dwell apart from you. To be estranged from your presence. To not know you. To be alone in this world. To be helpless in the face of our own sin.

Lord we thank you that you have sent us Christ. To dwell with us. To be a man like us. That we might know you.

[26 : 49] And we might be delivered from our enemies. Lord we pray that you would give us great faith. To trust in him. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. Amen. Let's sing this song.