

## **Ebenezer or Ichabod**

1Samuel 4:1-22

### *Do you remember a man from the Bible named Manoah?*

Like others in the Bible he and his wife had no children for a very long period of time and then one day the Angel of the LORD appeared to Manoah's wife and told her she would have a son.

The angel also told her to not have any "wine or fermented drink" and "that no razor may be used on his head" because the boy would be a Nazarite his whole life.

As is always the case, what the LORD promised happened and Manoah and his wife had a son and named him Sampson.

Sampson grew up and God, according to the power of the Holy Spirit, made him incredibly strong.

God did this in order to rescue the Israelites from the oppression of a neighboring people called the Philistines.

### *While Sampson did create a great deal of trouble for the Philistines, he also fell really short of God's high moral calling on his life.*

He eventually ends up in a relationship with a woman named Delilah who does all she can to figure out the secret of Sampson's strength so that she can betray him to the Philistines.

Sampson lies to her at first saying, "If someone ties me up with seven fresh bow strings that have not been dried, I'll become as weak as any other man."

She does just that and calls out "the Philistines are upon you!" He jumps up very easily snaps the bow strings and is ready to fight.

That should have been enough to create some concern in his mind about Delilah, and maybe it did, but he doesn't change course.

### *That same thing happens two more times and Sampson does not tell her the truth.*

Delilah is persistent though. The Bible says "with nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death."

He then tells her the truth. He tells her if his head is "shaved he'll become as weak as any other man."

Sampson had been in downward moral spiral for years and this was the last straw.

Delilah shaves his head, presumably ties him up and calls out, "Samson the Philistines are upon you!"

What the Scripture says next is a real tragedy. It says, "He awoke from his sleep and thought, 'I'll go out as before and shake myself free.' But he did not know that the LORD had left him."

His enemies then gouge out his eyes, take him captive, and make him grind grain in prison occasionally being put on display for the entertainment of his enemies.

[What a terrible thing to have happen? To not know that God is no longer with you. There are some strong parallels between what happens to Sampson and what happens to Israel in the text we are looking at this morning **1Samuel 4:1-22**. I am completely convinced that if you are truly converted, that is you really know Jesus Christ as your saviour then this will be a matter of great concern to you. We will want to avoid the things that this chapter warns us about so that we will have a properly placed confidence in the salvation of the LORD. I've entitled this message "Ebenezer or Ichabod" Ebenezer means "Rock of Help", praise God He is that for His people. Ichabod means "No Glory", which is where we end up if we fail to pay attention to the warnings of Scripture. This chapter has four warnings for us. Number one is this...]

**Point #1 – Presuming God’s favour gives people false confidence. (Verse 1-5)**

If we think God will act kindly towards us apart from His clearly stated promises we end up living with expectations that lead to great disappointment.

Chapter four opens with a scene that was very common in the nation of Israel during that time period.

It is the scene of warfare and they are fighting with the same group of people that Sampson struggled with, the Philistines.

Notice in verse one here it says that the Israelites set up their camp at 'Ebenezer'.

Karl Keil makes the keen observation that this place doesn't get that name until chapter 7, but in the writing of this account the writer gives the place its future name.

The writer is likely doing that because his readers would know the place by that name, but it also serves to create a dramatic contrast with what is about to take place.

Let's look at what happens in **verse 2**.

That is devastating. It is easy to read numbers like four thousand dead and move on to the next verse.

These are all sons, brothers, fathers, husbands, uncles, and friends.

They go out to battle and they don't come home, it is a tremendous loss.

The loss leads to a question in the first part of **verse 3a**.

That is a good question. It is also worth remembering that the LORD is speaking through Samuel and that His word is spreading throughout Israel.

They could have sought out an answer to their question, but instead we read this in **verses 3-5**.

You may recall the ark was a box that God commanded Moses to make.

It was roughly 45”L x 27”W x 27”H, it had an incredible carving of two angels on the lid which faced one another with their wings overshadowing the ark, and it was all overlaid with pure gold.

It was to be placed in the most Holy place in the tabernacle (tent for worship) and above the angels God made His presence visible which is why they say in verse 4 that the LORD of the armies of heaven is enthroned there.

They are thinking God goes where the ark goes and if the ark is present God will do battle on their behalf.

That is why there is a loud shout when the ark comes into the camp, so loud that the earth shook it says in verse 5.

The people are thinking back to previous battles where the ark was there and God carried the day and they are thinking, “Get ready you Philistines because you are going to get it now.”

They are presuming God will do something for them because they have the ark and they are celebrating before anything happens.

[One of the mistakes I have made repeatedly in life is greatly underestimating the amount of time a project will take. Someone will ask, “Hey Mike how long do you think it will take to do this?” Just a couple of hours I will say. When I say that I’m presuming everything will go well. Often times it doesn’t. Something breaks, something is missing, or something unexpected happens and before you know it two hours has turned into six and it is still not done.]

That is what presumption does. It gives us a false perception of reality and that can lead to trouble.

Nowhere in that more serious than our dealings with the LORD.

Most people presume that they are all good with God.

Most people perceive themselves to be good and they are on their way to a positive experience in the afterlife.

On what basis do people come to those sorts of conclusions?

It’s not the Bible.

It comes from themselves and they live with an expectation that God is going to agree with their thinking.

[That is a false hope. And whether you are the Israelites standing on a battlefield ready to fight against the Philistines or someone who thinks they have nothing to worry about before a Holy God that is a dangerous place to be because eventually false hope comes to an end. That is what we see here and that leads us to a second warning from this text. Here is the second warning...]

**Point #2 – Thinking like an idolater leads to destruction. (Verses 6-10)**

Almighty God is not bound by objects, or ritual, or anything outside of Himself. Thinking of God in those terms is absolute blasphemy and will come under the judgement of the LORD.

*The Philistine camp is not all that far from the Israelite camp and so when the people raise an earth shaking shout, the Philistines hear it.*

Someone how word comes to them according to verse 6 that the “ark of the LORD had come into the camp.”

They immediately become fearful.

Verse 8 tells us that they are thinking back to what God had done to the Egyptians.

God brought one of the most, if not the most, powerful nations on the face of the earth to its knees.

This is the God who parts the waters and rains down fire from heaven.

*They are right to be afraid of God.*

All of those things they heard about are true.

The LORD could wipe them out in an instant.

But they are thinking about the true God like one of their idols.

You see they worship false gods and they make statues of those gods, which is what the bible calls idols, and they bow down to those statues thinking that there is something inherently powerful in a block of wood, or a chunk of gold or silver.

Look with me at the end of **verse 6** and the beginning of **verse 7**.

*Why do they think “a god has come into the camp”?*

Because the ark was brought.

They think God Almighty works on the same principles as their false gods.

And the Israelites to their great shame are thinking the same thing.

Some in the Philistine camp try to muster the courage of their troops and this is what happens (**Verses 9-10**).

Four thousand was bad, thirty thousand is horrible.

Bringing the ark doesn't help, it makes things worse.

[A few years ago I was at the airport in Windsor and I ended up chatting with one of the guys who has been working on restoring the Lancaster Bomber that used to be in Jackson Park. He told me how much it was to refurbish the engine and how a local auto mechanic told them he could fix it because an “engine is an engine”. Needless to say that engine is now completely beyond repair. He made it worse.]

That is what thinking like an unbeliever does.

That is certainly true in the life of the Christian individually and in the life of the church as a whole.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say, "The church has to change to get with the times or it will die."

Who cares what the Bible says, we have to make this whole thing attractive to people.

That kind of thinking is signing the death warrant of many churches and harming the cause of the gospel.

We are encouraged by the world to put ourselves first.

That brings so much unnecessary division.

The world tells us to make ourselves secure in the things of this world, but there is no security to be found there.

That brings evil not good.

[I'm well aware that much of what God tells us in the Scriptures is the opposite to the thinking of our unbelieving friends and neighbors. That is why Jesus said that the road to destruction is wide and the path that leads to life is narrow. If you have more in common with your godless acquaintances then you do with people who love the word of God you should be fearful of this warning. Here is a third warning.

### **Point #3 – God always acts according to His covenant promises. (Verses 11-18)**

The LORD has clearly established how people are to relate to Him and He faithfully and consistently honours what He has said.

Verses 11-13 tell us that in the battle the ark is captured, the two sons of Eli have been killed, and a Benjamite has come from the battle to Shiloh to tell everyone what has happened.

There is a bit of irony in a Benjamite delivering this news as the name 'Benjamin' means "son of the right hand" indicating power and strength.

This man comes with torn clothes and dirt on his head which is a picture of lament and indeed the news that he brings causes great distress amongst the people.

All of this gets the attention of Eli the priest and we read this in **verses 14-18.**

Israel has been defeated, many have died, those remaining run away, Hophni and Phinehas are dead, the ark is in the hands of the Philistines, and the news brings about the death of Eli.

Why does all of this happen?

Because Israel has not been faithful to the covenant God made with them and this is what he said would happen as a result.

In Deuteronomy 28-30 the LORD lays it all out for the people.

Do what God commands and live long in the land.

Profane the worship of the LORD and suffer defeat at the hands of your enemies.

That is what happens here.

We also have God's word to Eli that came through Samuel as well as an earlier prophet, which is fulfilled exactly like He said it would be.

All the LORD is doing here is what He said He would do.

Listen, He is faithful to what He says.

He is gracious beyond measure, but He also does not neglect justice.

It is very easy to lose sight of that.

[In his great book entitled "The Holiness of God" RC Sproul tells a story about teaching a group of college students. On the first day of class he gave the students the syllabus and made it very clear that late assignments would receive an 'F'. The day the first assignment was due there was a small group of students who didn't have it done. They begged and pleaded and Professor Sproul gave them an extension. When the second assignment came around the number of late papers increased and though he was really irked by this he again gave them grace. On day of the third assignment the number grew dramatically more and Mr. Sproul had enough and gave them all an 'F'. What do you think the students said? They said, "It's not fair!" They had no appreciation for true fairness at all. They had abused the professor's generosity and he had merely done what he very clearly said he would do.]

How often are people willing to shake their fist at God and say, "It's not fair!" when all the while they have no real concept of what fair truly is.

When people tell God "It's not fair!" they are correct but for the total opposite reason they think.

The word fair implies justice. If we all got what was fair all of our lives would be over after disobeying God one time and we would all be in hell forever.

The fact that we are alive right now isn't fair.

*It's much bigger than that however, Christ coming into the world and dying on the cross is the greatest unfairness of all.*

What did He do to deserve death? What did He do to deserve the full measure of God's wrath upon the cross?

Nothing. He has deserved for all eternity all the riches and favour of all creation forever.

There is nothing fair about the cross, it is not fairness it is immeasurable grace that Jesus would die for you and for me.

That through faith in His life, death, and resurrection His perfection gets credited to us.

Completely unfair and infinitely wonderful and glorious.

[God does no one any wrong by simply doing what He says He will do. Faithfulness to His covenant promises is the necessary result of Who He is. If we are not willing to live under His covenant of Grace then we shall perish in eternity. That leads us to one last warning from this chapter in 1 Samuel. The fourth warning is that...]

**Point #4 – Treating God with contempt means missing out on His glory. (Verses 19-22).**

The LORD will not abide with anyone who has disregard for Him in their heart.

The news of all of this calamity that happens in a single day comes to yet another person we are told about in the last few verses of this chapter. (Verses 19-22)

Complications during child birth in the ancient world could very easily become life threatening to both the baby and the mother.

That happens here with the wife of Phinehas.

In order to appreciate what the midwives say to her in verse 20 we have to appreciate how highly valued motherhood was among the people of Israel.

Without a doubt they made a lot of mistakes and got a lot of things wrong through a great deal of their history, but they got this right.

Children are a gift from the LORD a treasure entrusted to mothers and fathers.

We saw that back in chapter one with the pleading of Samuel's mother to be able to have a son.

It is that kind of holding of motherhood is such high regard that leads them to say "Don't despair (more literally don't be afraid) you have given birth to a son."

She doesn't even acknowledge what they say to her. There isn't an ounce of joy for her in the birth of her son.

She simply names the boy, "Ichabod" which means "no glory".

It is a statement of total despair. God has left town and things are absolutely hopeless in the face of that reality.

The question I have reading this is, "When did God's glory depart?"

Now, I don't want to minimize the importance of the Ark of the Covenant.

God commanded that it be made and He did cause His glory to be visible above the angels on the cover of the ark.

It was a holy object set apart by God as a very important part of tabernacle worship.

That said, it would be wrong headed to think that presence of the ark automatically meant God's glory was present.

God's dwelling with His people depended on them responding in faith to what the LORD commanded.

That had not been the case for many years.

While on this day the tangible object of the place of God's dwelling had been lost, love for His glory had been gone for some time and this day was the consequence of that reality.

Hophni, Phinehas, Eli, and many of the people had shown contempt for the LORD to one degree or another.

Their deaths show us that it is impossible to show that kind of disregard for the LORD and still get to enjoy His glory.

*God's whole purpose in redeeming us through the work of Christ is for us to enjoy Him forever.*

Our sin is what keeps us from God's glory, but in Jesus our sins are removed and we are granted irrevocable access to the living God.

In Christ we can say with great confidence that God is our Ebenezer.

That is because true conversion gives us a love and delight in the glory of God.

Apart from Him you can be sure that you have the name Ichabod.

You have no share in God's glory.

Which name describes your life? Is it Ebenezer or Ichabod?

*Heed the warnings of this text.*

Don't presume God's favour, but rather have confidence in the rock of our salvation Jesus Christ.

Don't think like an unbeliever. It harm the church and will bring about your destruction.

Remember that God always acts according to His promises.

Don't treat God with contempt and miss out on the eternal joy of His glory.

Avoid these things and you will avoid the name Ichabod and instead enjoy the name Ebenezer.