



Community Group Discussion Guide

September 15, 2024

1 Samuel 4:1-22; 5:1-12; 6:1-21; 7:1-17 | The Ark of God

MOTIVATE

Starter Questions:

- ⇒ ***Starter question: What kinds of religious or faith symbols are common to our Christian culture today?***
- ⇒ ***How can these be used either positively or negatively? Why should we be cautious in their use?***

NOTE TO CG LEADERS: Because this guide covers four chapters, 1 Samuel 4-7, the actual Scripture passages are not contained in this document as they normally are. However, a link has been included to aid you in utilizing the biblical passage.

DISCUSS

1 Samuel 4–7 relates the painful lessons Israel had to learn about the ark of the covenant. Through misuse of this sacred symbol of God’s presence with His people, the Israelites tried to win a battle against the Philistines by manipulating God for their own purposes. As a result, the sinful regime of Eli and his sons came to its tragic end and the ark was captured by the Philistines. In 1 Samuel 7, even though the Israelites no longer had the ark, Samuel led them to repentance, and God delivered them from the Philistines. The ark would remain lost to Israel for many years until its return to a proper place of glory during David’s reign.¹

- ⇒ ***What do you know about the ark of the covenant?***

[Read 1 Samuel 4:1-2](#). 1 Samuel 4:1 confirms again that Samuel was the new leader and prophet over all of Israel. In God’s covenant relationship with His people, all battles were to be fought under God’s direction. First, God Himself was to lead Israel into battle. Also, before a battle God was to be sought to determine if it was His will for Israel to fight or not. The text never states that Samuel or the people asked for God’s leadership in this particular instance.² It is also unclear who the aggressor was in this battle. The Philistine forces camped at Aphek, a city in Israelite territory, while the Israelite forces camped two miles away at Ebenezer. This initial battle went badly for the Israelites with a loss of about four thousand soldiers.

The Philistines had been in Palestine since the time of Abraham. Descendants of Noah’s son, Ham, they were a non-Jewish people who came from other parts of the Mediterranean world to settle in the Promised Land during the days of the judges. The Philistines posed the single greatest military threat to Israel since entering Canaan.

- ⇒ ***Discuss this quote: Religious symbols can be a powerful testimony to someone’s faith. But such symbols can also be misused. The Israelites misunderstood the purpose of the ark of the covenant. The ark was the symbol of God’s presence with His people. The ark was not God. Nor could the Israelites manipulate God or guarantee His presence by moving the ark wherever they pleased. Israel learned this the hard way.***³

Read or refer to 1 Samuel 4:3-4. Considered the throne of Yahweh, the ark of the covenant was Israel’s holiest and most prized object. God had commanded Moses to have the Israelites build the ark while they were encamped at Mount Sinai during their Exodus from Egypt. As a symbol of God’s

¹ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, p. 43). Holman Reference.

² Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, p. 46). Holman Reference.

³ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, p. 44). Holman Reference.

presence, the ark also came to have a significant military function. When Moses led the Israelite nation away from Mount Sinai for the first time, the ark led them through the desert and into the Promised Land as a means of protection and guidance.⁴

The Israelites had not prepared themselves for God's presence to come into their midst as they did before crossing the Jordan River in Joshua 3:5–6. Rather than examining their lives for disobedience, the elders of Israel made a foolish decision to bring the ark of the covenant from Shiloh along with the wicked sons of Eli. This lack of spiritual insight would have devastating consequences and God would not bless Israel's wars.

The Israelites relied on the ark as a substitute for God, forgetting that the ark represented the glory of God's presence among His people. They presumed they could reverse the horrible events of the day by treating the ark as if they could parade this sacred object in front of Yahweh and have instant success before their enemies. But the sins of Eli and his sons were not being addressed, and God could not be manipulated.⁵

- ⇒ ***Are you ever tempted to trust in rituals or symbols in your worship to guarantee that God will bless you?***
- ⇒ ***Are you sometimes inclined to think that God's presence and power can be controlled or presumed upon?***

Read 1 Samuel 4:5-11. At first the Philistines were terrified at the mighty shout raised by Israel when the ark arrived, thinking that a god had come into the camp. Instead of running, the Philistines resolved to fight harder. The Israelites were defeated and left the field of battle. Three disastrous results followed from Israel's foolishness in believing that God's presence and power could be controlled:

- 30,000 Israelite soldiers died.
- The ark of the covenant was captured by the Philistines.
- Both Hophni and Phinehas were killed, fulfilling the prophecy against Eli's house for their sins.

- ⇒ ***What should have been the Israelites' immediate response toward God when they were defeated?***

Read 1 Samuel 4:12-18. News of defeat reached Shiloh and the citizens mourned greatly. A messenger from the tribe of Benjamin returned from the battle to Shiloh. His clothes were torn and he had dust on his head, both signs of mourning. He found the elderly, nearly blind Eli sitting by the side of the road waiting and watching. Eli must have discerned that leading the ark into battle would be disastrous "for his heart trembled for the ark of God."

When Eli heard the outcry in Shiloh, he demanded to know what had happened. The messenger first stated that Israel had fled before the Philistines and suffered great defeat. Then the news came that Eli's sons were dead. When the messenger revealed that the ark of God had been captured, Eli, a heavy old man, fell over backward from his seat, broke his neck, and died.⁶

Read 1 Samuel 4:19-22. Eli's daughter-in-law, Phinehas's wife, also heard the tragic news. She was pregnant, and the news of the deaths of her husband and father-in-law and the capture of the ark caused her to go into premature labor. Before dying during the birthing process, she named the son that was born Ichabod.

This was not a name of joy for the birth of a male child. It was one of sadness and pain, because the Hebrew name means "No Glory," or "Where is the Glory?" Twice she explained Ichabod's name, stating that "the glory has departed from Israel" because of the death of her husband and father-in-law

⁴ Arnold, B. T. (2003). *1 & 2 Samuel* (p. 95). Zondervan.

⁵ Arnold, B. T. (2003). *1 & 2 Samuel* (p. 95). Zondervan.

⁶ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). *1, 2 Samuel* (Vol. 6, p. 48). Holman Reference.

and the capture of the ark. In truth, the ark was captured because God's glory had already departed due to the sins of Israel and Eli's family.

- ⇒ ***What does the fulfillment of this prophecy against Eli's house reveal about God?***
- ⇒ ***Have you ever experienced an "Ichabod" moment?***

Read 1 Samuel 5:1-5. The Philistines took their captured treasure from the abandoned Israelite camp and placed it beside the image of their god Dagon in his pagan temple at Ashdod. In the foothills of the Judean mountains, Ashdod was one of five major Philistine cities. Since the ark was brought to the temple there, Ashdod may have been the preeminent site for worship of Dagon. Much like Baal, Dagon was likely a grain or storm god.

The Philistines believed that since they had won the battle, Dagon must have defeated the God of the Israelites. Now just as Israel would serve the Philistines, Yahweh would serve Dagon. Though the Philistines placed the ark in an inferior position beside their god Dagon, they soon learned that Israel's God was the superior deity.

When Dagon's priests opened up the temple the next morning, they discovered that Dagon's image was lying face down on the ground in a position of worship before the ark, reflecting an act of reverence and submission before Yahweh. The so-called victorious god now needed the help of men to regain his pedestal.⁷

The next morning Dagon's humiliation was repeated, but this time Dagon's head and hands had been cut off and were lying on the threshold. Decapitation and cutting off hands was not infrequent in ancient warfare. Thus, the condition of Dagon on the second morning is a sign of military defeat.⁸ In respect to their fallen deity, the priests and worshipers of Dagon avoided stepping on the threshold of his temple.

- ⇒ ***Discuss this quote: Yahweh will not permit the Israelites to use the ark of the covenant as though it were a magical wand. But neither can He permit the Philistines to demean Him as a trophy of their victory. This episode illustrates that Yahweh Himself is responsible for Israel's defeat and that, contrary to appearances, He is not powerless in the hands of Israel's enemies.***⁹

Read 1 Samuel 5:6-7. The Philistines' experienced firsthand the power of Israel's one, true God when He sent a terrifying plague of tumors on the people of Ashdod. The disease producing the tumors was apparently carried by rats (see 1 Samuel 6:4–5). Scholars are divided over the exact nature of the malady. While the people of Ashdod were not sure what kind of god the ark represented, they understood that Israel's God had brought this upon them and that neither they nor their god Dagon could stand up to Him. They quickly decided to get the ark out of their city before more damage was done.

- ⇒ ***Discuss how imposing and fearful these phrases are: "The hand of the LORD was heavy against the people of Ashdod." "His hand is hard against us."***

Read 1 Samuel 5:8-12. A council of Philistine rulers concluded that the ark should be sent to the neighboring city of Gath, another of the Philistine's five cities. But the plague of tumors immediately broke out there, afflicting men of all ages in Gath. To protect themselves, the panicked residents sent the ark to Ekron, a third major Philistine city.

The Philistines at Ekron, however, were wary of the devastation the ark had caused at Ashdod and Gath. As soon as the ark entered their city, they cried out in great fear for "the hand of God was heavy there." No sooner did the ark enter Ekron than the plague fell upon them. Calling another council of

⁷ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, pp. 49–50). Holman Reference.

⁸ Arnold, B. T. (2003). [1 & 2 Samuel](#) (p. 118). Zondervan.

⁹ Arnold, B. T. (2003). [1 & 2 Samuel](#) (p. 117). Zondervan.

Philistine rulers, they were certain that the ark should be sent back to its own place, or it would surely kill them all.¹⁰

⇒ ***Discuss this quote: They may have been limited by pagan polytheism, but the Philistines understood that Israel's God was more powerful than anything they had ever experienced.***¹¹

Read 1 Samuel 6:1-6. The ark remained in Philistine hands for seven months. However, the Philistines realized that keeping it any longer would only mean bringing more ruin on themselves. After consulting their pagan priests and diviners, they decided to return the ark to Israel. But they were determined to be careful how they returned it, fearing they might suffer more consequences.

The Philistine priests recommended a guilt offering (Leviticus 7:1–6) be sent along with the ark to atone for their sin. The guilt offering was required when a person violated holy things that had been dedicated to the LORD. The offering demonstrates the seriousness of violations against God and is primarily about making reparations. If the Philistines knew that the God of Israel desired a guilt offering, they certainly did not know what kind. The diviners recommended five gold tumors and five gold rats corresponding to the number of the Philistine cities and rulers. According to the diviners, this act would heal the Philistines, and as a consequence determine why God was afflicting them.

The Philistines mistakenly thought Israel had more than one god. To them, these were the gods that brought the plagues against the Egyptians. The religious leaders warned the Philistine leaders not to harden their hearts like the Egyptians, but to pay honor to Israel's God.

⇒ ***Why is there irony in that the glory Israel refused to ascribe to God by trying to use the ark for their own purposes would be offered to Him by the Philistines?***

Read 1 Samuel 6:7-12. Some Philistines doubted possession of the ark was responsible for their plagues. In order to prove or disprove a connection, a test was set up. The ark would be placed on a new cart and pulled by two cows that were suckling calves but had never been yoked. The calves were taken away and penned up. If the untrained cows could resist their maternal instincts by walking past their bleating calves and without any training could smoothly pull together in the yoke to keep the cart going straight down the road toward Beth-shemesh in Israelite territory, then it was certain that Yahweh had brought this great disaster upon them. But if not, then the Philistines would know that all of this happened by chance.

Under normal circumstances these “mothers” would never leave their young. When the cart and cows were released, they went straight down the road to Israel, bringing the ark to the fields just outside of Beth-shemesh, a city inhabited by members of the priestly tribe of Levi. Yahweh had spoken. He had destroyed the Philistines' god, their land, and their bodies. He was sending the Philistines the message that he was the one true sovereign God.¹²

⇒ ***Why are we inclined to doubt God is in control of all things?***

Read 1 Samuel 6:13-16. When the people of Beth-shemesh looked up from their harvesting and saw noisy cows pulling a new cart with the ark of covenant, they rejoiced. The destination was no coincidence. Beth-shemesh was a Levitical city, set aside for the clan of Kohath, the Levitical family in charge of caring for the ark. It stands to reason that the people of Beth-shemesh would have known how to treat the ark as the symbol of God's holy presence—or at least they should have known.

The cows stopped and the cart came to rest at a large rock in a field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh. The Levites took the ark and the chest containing the gold objects sent by the Philistines off the cart and set them on this rock. In celebration the residents offered God a sacrifice by chopping up and burning the cart and the cows. However, only male animals were to be used in burnt offerings (Leviticus 1:3).

¹⁰ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, pp. 50–51). Holman Reference.

¹¹ Arnold, B. T. (2003). [1 & 2 Samuel](#) (p. 96). Zondervan.

¹² Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, pp. 51–52). Holman Reference.

⇒ ***How does this reckless act of not precisely following the sacrificial regulations of God serve as an early indication of impending divine judgment against the people of Beth-shemesh?***¹³

The Israelites offered other burnt offerings and sacrifices to the LORD, and the five rulers of the Philistines watched the festivities from a distance. Their attempt to test God had failed. It was the hand of the LORD that had brought the plague of tumors against them.¹⁴

Read 1 Samuel 6:17-19. Some of the men of Beth-shemesh further violated the Law of Moses by looking into the ark. No Israelite outside of the Aaronic priesthood was ever to be permitted to see even the outside of the ark, let alone the inside (Numbers 4:5–6). The Levitical Kohathites who were charged with carrying the ark were even forbidden to touch or view the ark. They transported the covered ark with poles (Exodus 25:13–15; 37:5). The first obligation of the Levites and priests of Beth-shemesh was to hide the ark from view while avoiding any physical or visual contact with it.¹⁵

These men showed disrespect for God by touching His earthly throne and peering inside the ark. In perspective, no earthly king would have allowed this casual disrespect either. Because of their shameless disregard of the sanctity of the ark, the LORD struck them down.

⇒ ***Discuss this quote: God wants us to bow before His holiness with respect and reverence. There is a danger in being in the presence of the Lord of Hosts, especially when we come into His presence with arrogance or apathy.***¹⁶

Read 1 Samuel 6:19-21; 7:1-2. Just like the elders of Israel at Ebenezer (1 Samuel 4:3), the people of Beth-shemesh first asked a correct theological question and then followed with the wrong solution. Their first question was appropriate: Who can stand in the presence of the LORD? The answer was “no one.”

The response of faith would be to bow in repentance and reverence before a holy God. But the people of Beth-shemesh had already shown their true colors by mourning the heavy blow the LORD had dealt them instead of with their sin. So it is not surprising that their second question signified the wrong solution. Like the Philistines, all the Israelites were concerned about was sending the ark off to the next city. There was no self-searching, no confession of wrongdoing. This act confirmed the spiritual darkness of their hearts.¹⁷

Fearing the ark, the people of Beth-shemesh sent a short, cryptic message to the people of Kiriath-jearim, an obscure village east of Beth-shemesh, to come get the ark and take it up to their place. The men of Kiriath-jearim accepted the offer and moved the ark to Abinadab’s house. Eleazar, Abinadab’s son, was consecrated to take charge of the ark. The ark would remain there until David took it to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:2).

⇒ ***Discuss why there is hope in the last line of 1 Samuel 2:2: And all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.***

Read 1 Samuel 7:3-6. After twenty years had passed in which the ark remained at Kiriath-jeraim and the Israelites longed for the LORD, Samuel returns to the pages of Scripture. He had been absent since the time Israel had gone out to fight the Philistines. What takes place in this chapter is in direct contrast to the first debacle at Ebenezer (1 Samuel 4:1). Samuel led Israel to follow the proper steps in seeking God’s help. The difference is clear, and the result was dramatic.

¹³ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, pp. 52–53). Holman Reference.

¹⁴ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, pp. 52–53). Holman Reference.

¹⁵ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, pp. 52–53). Holman Reference.

¹⁶ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, pp. 54–55). Holman Reference.

¹⁷ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, pp. 53–54). Holman Reference.

Israel's repentance had to be genuine. They must return to God with all their hearts. They must rid themselves of the foreign gods in their homes and hearts. Since these gods were often represented in idol form, this must be a concrete action, physically removing and destroying the idol. Samuel clearly stated that the Ashtaroths must also be forsaken. Ashtaroth, often associated with Baal, was the name of the goddess of a Canaanite fertility cult. Sexual rites were part of its worship.

The people of Israel responded positively to Samuel's call for repentance by putting away their idols and worshiping only the LORD. After the people obeyed Samuel, he gathered them together in Mizpah for a solemn assembly at which the people fasted, prayed, and confessed their sins. Israel also performed a water offering before the LORD. This is the only time Israel did so in a religious convocation, and its significance must not be overlooked. This was Israel's "confession that the LORD's favor was more important to them than life-sustaining water."¹⁸

For the first time in the book, Samuel is identified as a judge of Israel.

- ⇒ *How can we ensure our repentance is genuine?*
- ⇒ *When has genuine repentance brought a dramatic change to your life?*

Read 1 Samuel 7:7-12. The Philistines learned of the meeting, became concerned, and gathered their forces to attack Israel at Mizpah. The Israelites were frightened when they saw the advancing Philistines. The military threat had not changed, but the people had repented from worshipping Canaanite gods and from trying to manipulate Yahweh with the ark. This time the people implored Samuel to continue interceding on their behalf. He offered a sacrifice and prayed to God for them.

God responded with a miracle, causing the Philistine army to panic and run at the sound of thunder—a sound which the soldiers interpreted as the advance of the angry deity against them. In the biblical world, people believed battles between human armies were accompanied by a heavenly battle between the armies' deities. Strange weather occurrences during a battle were proof of military movements of the gods and could be a reason for human armies to advance or retreat.

The Israelites seized the opportunity, pursuing the fleeing army and killing the stragglers. Without the ark at hand, God turned the shame of the defeat of 1 Samuel 4 into the rejoicing of triumph.¹⁹ To commemorate God's victory over the Philistines, Samuel set up a "stone of remembrance" which he named Ebenezer, "The Stone of Help." This was a visual testimony of God's saving work in Israel. The Ebenezer mentioned here is regarded by many as a different place than the site mentioned in 1 Samuel 4:1. But the two Ebenezers tie these chapters together thematically and contrast the humiliating defeat in 1 Samuel 4 with the victory in 1 Samuel 7.²⁰ By doing this Samuel sought to keep the memory of God's deliverance current in Israel's mind. He wanted Israel to remember the past and be thankful for God's help.²¹

- ⇒ *If you were to set a "stone of remembrance" today, what would you name it and why?*

Read 1 Samuel 7:13-17. As long as Samuel was alive, God helped Israel subdue the Philistines and establish a peaceful coexistence with the Amorites. The Israelite towns from Ekron to Gath previously conquered by the Philistines were returned to Israel.

All the days of his life, Samuel continued to provide leadership throughout central Israel by regularly holding court at four different sites: Bethel, Gilgal, Mizpah, and his hometown of Ramah. Since Samuel built an altar at Ramah, it is most likely that Shiloh had been destroyed by the Philistines.²²

¹⁸ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). *1, 2 Samuel* (Vol. 6, pp. 53–54). Holman Reference.

¹⁹ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). *1, 2 Samuel* (Vol. 6, pp. 55–56). Holman Reference.

²⁰ Arnold, B. T. (2003). *1 & 2 Samuel* (p. 143). Zondervan.

²¹ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). *1, 2 Samuel* (Vol. 6, p. 57). Holman Reference.

²² Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). *1, 2 Samuel* (Vol. 6, p. 57). Holman Reference.

TRANSFORM

1. Make personal application: The ark of the covenant was a powerful testimony of God's saving presence with Israel. Today's study reminds us that we must be careful not to think we can manipulate God's presence and power. Since God is holy, we also cannot presume to come into His presence with an arrogant and sinful attitude.

- ⇒ *What did you learn personally from the example of the Philistines and the Israelites?*
- ⇒ *Why is it important to remember that while God wants to work through you, He is not dependent upon you?*
- ⇒ *In what ways can you honor God and give Him the glory for all He does in your life?*

2. Pray: Ask God to help us see the real meaning behind symbols of our faith. Confess those recent times when you presumed upon His presence. Praise Him for His mercy and grace in our lives and in our church. Pray He will cause us to seek and to serve Him with all our hearts.

STUDY

Resources used, compiled from, and quoted:

- *Holman New Testament Commentary, 1 and 2 Samuel, pages 41-63.*
- *The NIV Application Commentary, 1 and 2 Samuel pages 91-146.*
- *Shepherd's Notes, 1 and 2 Samuel, pages 11-16.*