THE ARK IS LOST

Victor strolled through one audition after another. He had wanted to become a model since he was a teenager. As he grew older and worked on his physique, Victor was confident of his calling. He loved to recite God's promise that He will give you the desires of your heart, if you trust in Him (from Ps. 37:4). Never mind that a youth pastor had warned him not to take Scripture out of context. Victor attended church, prayed, and honored his parents. He persevered and thought that would be enough. A few years later, he was bitter and angry with God, who had not fulfilled his dream.

Regina went to the same university as her high school sweetheart, and they even got jobs working for the same law firm. Throughout their time together, Regina believed that God had given Robert as her soulmate. She just knew they would be married, have children, and live happily ever after some day. But after eight years, Robert decided that he didn't want to be married. Regina pleaded with God to change Robert's heart. But instead, he took a job in another state and moved away—without contacting her. Regina felt as if the world had betrayed her, as if God had betrayed her.

Victor and Regina assumed that they knew God's will for their lives. Neither spent time with God, studied His Word, or sought the counsel of brothers and sisters at church. They were too busy assuming that what they wanted most, God would provide.

1 When have you seen someone try to use God to justify what they wanted?

2 Is it wrong to make specific requests of God? Why or why not?

12 And there ran a man of Benjamin out of the army, and came to Shiloh the same day with his clothes rent, and with earth upon his head. 13 And when he came, lo, Eli sat upon a seat by the wayside watching: for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city, and told it, all the city cried out.
14 And when Eli heard the noise of the crying, he said, What meaneth the noise of this tumult?
And the man came in hastily, and told Eli. 15 Now Eli was ninety and eight years old; and his eyes were dim, that he could not see. 16 And the man said unto Eli, I am he that came out of the army, and I fled to day out of the army.
And he said, What is there done, my son?
17 And the messenger answered and said, Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there hath been also a great slaughter among the people, and thy two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God is taken.
18 And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God, that he fell from off the seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck brake, and he died: for he was an old man, and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years.

12 That same day a Benjamite ran from the battle line and went to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dust on his head. 13 When he arrived, there was Eli sitting on his chair by the side of the road, watching, because his heart feared for the ark of God. When the man entered the town and told what had happened, the whole town sent up a cry.
14 Eli heard the outcry and asked, "What is the meaning of this uproar?"
The man hurried over to Eli, 15 who was ninety-eight years old and whose eyes had failed so that he could not see. 16 He told Eli, "I have just come from the battle line; I fled from it this very day."
Eli asked, "What happened, my son?"
17 The man who brought the news replied, "Israel fled before the Philistines, and the army has suffered heavy losses. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured."
18 When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backward off his chair by the side of the gate. His neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man, and he was heavy. He had led Israel forty years.

Domesticating Mystery

The Philistines were relative newcomers to Canaan, but Israel had not removed them at the time of the judges. They might be the most well-known of Israel's adversaries during the settlement period.

They were around in the days of Samson—one of the judges—and they continued to trouble Israel during the early days of the kings. For example, Goliath was a Philistine champion.

On this particular occasion early in the ministry of Samuel, Israel suffers a defeat at the hands Philistines, and thousands of Israelites are killed (1 Sam. 4:2). Instead of consulting with God, the Israelites take matters into their own hands. Eli's wicked sons aid in the plan to take the ark of the covenant into battle, using it as a charm or a protective, magical object (1 Sam. 4:3–4). After all, at least they are thinking of God as a protector—right?

At first, it appears that the strategy will work. The Philistines are afraid when they hear the shouts from the Israelite camp. Perhaps the Israelites were thinking of the capture of Jericho, which happened by marching around the city with the ark (Josh. 6:2–5). We are primed to think that the results might be the same, now against the Philistines.

But things do not go according to plan. Israel loses a second battle. This time, *tens of thousands* of fighting men are killed, and the ark—instead of assuring victory—becomes a spoil of the Philistines' triumph! They take it from the Israelites, slaughtering Eli's sons in the battle (1 Sam. 4:17). News of this calamity ends Eli's life; he meets a bad end as Samuel had predicted.

Without specific instructions from the Lord, this showed a poor understanding of God's provision. The Israelites are trying to use the ark as if it were a protective object that they can control—as if God were under their control.

1 Why would the Israelites think to carry the ark of the covenant into battle against the Philistines?

2 What is your reaction to reading about Eli's death after the bad news is told?

3 Why might the text mention Eli's poor eyesight?

19 And his daughter in law, Phinehas' wife, was with child, near to be delivered: and when she heard the tidings that the ark of God was taken, and that her father in law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and travailed; for her pains came upon her.
20 And about the time of her death the women that stood by her said unto her, Fear not; for thou hast born a son. But she answered not, neither did she regard it.
21 And she named the child Ichabod, saying, The glory is departed from Israel: because the ark of God was taken, and because of her father in law and her husband. 22 And she said, The glory is departed from Israel: for the ark of God is taken.

19 His daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant and near the time of delivery. When she heard the news that the ark of God had been captured and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she went into labor and gave birth, but was overcome by her labor pains. 20 As she was dying, the women attending her said, "Don't despair; you have given birth to a son." But she did not respond or pay any attention.
21 She 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. 22 She said, "The Glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."

Where Is God's Glory?

The scene shifts to another person's reaction to news about the capture of the ark. Still in Eli's household, his widowed daughter-in-law happens to be full-term and ready to have a baby. The bad news is enough to send her into labor (1 Sam. 4:19).

Unfortunately, the mother is having a difficult birth (not uncommon in antiquity), and she is near death when her child is born. In a patriarchal culture, sons were prized for their ability to carry on the family name. The birth of a son could be one of the most joyous events for any woman at this time (compare to Hannah in 1 Sam. 1:20). But the widow of Phinehas gives only a muted reaction to meeting her newborn son (1 Sam. 4:20).

As her final act, she gives the infant a name of sorrow: Ichabod, which sounds like the Hebrew question, "Where is the honor?" The name has both a personal and a national meaning (vv. 21–22). For her family, the name expresses grief and shock at a sudden end. For

the nation, the name references the glory of God, which now seems long gone, along with the ark. What a road it must have been to grow up with this name and knowing the sorrow that arrived along with his birth!

The anguish over the ark is justified, since its loss means a loss of any priestly role until it returns. No sacrifices, no sanctuary, no alternative way for the nation to keep up the covenant expectations. In addition to being a symbol of the presence of Yahweh, the ark contained three treasured items from Israel's history: (1) the tablets of the Ten Commandments, (2) a preserved piece of manna from heaven, and (3) Aaron's rod, which had budded as if it were a flowering plant. It was a small record of the history of God's journey with Israel.

The grief also leaves us to question: Are Eli and his daughter-in-law mourning over the ark and Israel's loss of sacred items given by God? Or are they terrified, still thinking that their secret weapon has fallen into the hands of their enemies, who might turn around and use it? Maybe they mourn because they now see that the ark is not a "silver bullet" that they can use to overcome any enemy. Or, even worse, perhaps they think that they have lost access to God, as if God's glory were *only* with that box and nowhere else.

All of these questions encourage us to think about Israel's perspective at this moment. Before the nation is ready to listen to Samuel as God's prophet, they must first learn to set aside foolish attempts to make God an object to be used. The one, true God is the source and goal of all created things. He does not exist for our sake—we exist for His.

1 Does your name have a meaning? Do you think about it in relation to your identity and actions?

2 In what ways might we be tempted to try to tame God for our purposes?

3 How can we avoid trying to use God?

Prayerful Superstitions

Christianity is a way of life charged with mystery and wonder. We believe that the God of the universe is concerned with and involved in our day-to-day lives. Therefore, it is difficult sometimes not to become superstitious. Think of an athlete who tries to repeat exactly what she did before her last competition. I don't mean things like physical training or mental preparation, but rituals like arriving at a precise time or taking the same roads on the way—in other words, superstitions. Even if someone understands that these things have no bearing on results, it is easy to say, "Well, what can it hurt?" and to do them anyway.

The Christian life can have similar pitfalls. We might try to guarantee success through formulaic behavior that seemed to "work" last time, as if the outcome were up to our rigorous adherence to a set pattern. Maybe we think that things will go our way if we have a perfect church attendance record for an entire year, and we worry that we will fall out of God's favor if a family vacation takes us away. Or perhaps we pray word-for-word the same repeated prayer that we prayed the last time we received a provision or blessing from God.

God honors genuine devotion and faithfulness. Sincere repetition and habits are also an indispensable part of a consistent faith. But discipleship does not consist of metrics on the order of, "If this is given, this outcome is certain." When we reduce the Christian life to mathematical equations, we are trying to take too much power into our own hands. None of us can make God do what we want. We must entrust ourselves to the one who judges faithfully.

1 What is a healthy and unhealthy way to think about routines as Christians?

2 How can we distinguish proper devotion from superstition?

3 How is God predictable? How is God mysterious?

Seeking Him First

What are some modern-day equivalents to carrying the ark into battle? Maybe we try to justify our own thoughts, words, or actions:

- Applying Scripture out of context
- Asking for God's blessing, rather than seeking His direction
- Rationalizing sin/assuming "God won't mind"

Lord, I know You can't be used as a good luck charm. In the decisions before me this week, help me to follow Your lead.

Key Text

And she said, The glory is departed from Israel: for the ark of God is taken. —1 Samuel 4:22 KJV

She said, "The Glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured." —1 Samuel 4:22 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of November 9 through November 14

Mon. 2 Peter 3:9–13—The Lord Is Patient.
Tue. Colossians 2:8–15—Avoid Worldly Entanglements.
Wed. Deuteronomy 20:1–9—The Lord Is with His People.
Thu. James 1:1–12—Remain Steadfast Under Trial.
Fri. Psalm 34:15–22—God Hears and Rescues.
Sat. 2 Chronicles 7:11–22—The Lord Speaks to the King.

Next Week: 1 Samuel 7:3–11, 15–17
What is a redemption story that moves you to tears, or that makes you want to celebrate God's mercy?