

CHAPTER 4

The predictions in the foregoing chapters concerning the ruin of Eli's house here begin to be fulfilled; how long after does not appear, but certainly not long. Such sinners God often makes quick work with. Here is,

- I.** The disgrace and loss Israel sustained in an encounter with the Philistines (v. 1, 2).
- II.** Their foolish project to fortify themselves by bringing the ark of God into their camp upon the shoulders of Hophni and Phinehas (v. 3, 4), which made them secure (v. 5) and struck a fear into the Philistines, but such a fear as roused them (v. 6-9).
- III.** The fatal consequences of it: Israel was beaten, and the ark taken prisoner (v. 10, 11).
- IV.** The tidings of this brought to Shiloh, and the sad reception of those tidings.
 - 1.** The city was put into confusion (v. 12, 13).
 - 2.** Eli fainted away, fell, and broke his neck (v. 14-18).
 - 3.** Upon hearing what had occurred his daughter-in-law fell in labour, bore a son, but died immediately (v. 19-22). These were the things which would make the ears of those that heard them to tingle.

1 SAMUEL 4:1-9

THE WAR WITH THE PHILISTINES

The first words of this paragraph, which relate to Samuel, that *his word came to all Israel*, seem not to have any reference to the following story, as if it was by any direction of his that the Israelites went out against the Philistines. Had they consulted him, though but newly initiated as a prophet, his counsel might have stood them in more stead than the presence of the ark did; but perhaps the princes of Israel despised his youth, and would not have recourse to him as an oracle, and he did not as yet interpose in public affairs; nor do we find any mention of his name henceforward till some years after (~~1~~ 1 Samuel 7:3), only *his word came*

to all Israel, that is, people from all parts that were piously disposed had recourse to him as a prophet and consulted him. Perhaps it is meant of his prophecy against the house of Eli. This was generally known and talked of, and all that were serious and observing compared the events here related, when they came to pass, with the prophecy, and saw it accomplished in them. Here is,

I. A war entered into with the Philistines, v. 1. It was an attempt to throw off the yoke of their oppression, and would have succeeded better if they had first repented and reformed, and so begun their work at the right end. It is computed that this was about the middle of the forty years' dominion that the Philistines had over Israel (^{<0713>}Judges 13:1) and soon after the death of Samson; so bishop Patrick, who thinks the slaughter he made at his death might encourage this attempt; but Dr. Lightfoot reckons it forty years after Samson's death, for so long Eli judged, v. 18.

II. The defeat of Israel in that war, v. 2. Israel, who were the aggressors, were smitten, and had 4000 men killed upon the spot. God had promised that one of them should chase a thousand; but now, on the contrary, *Israel is smitten before the Philistines*. Sin, the accursed thing, was in the camp, and gave their enemies all the advantage against them they could wish for.

III. The measures they concerted for another engagement. A council of war was called, and, instead of resolving to fast and pray and amend their lives, so ill taught were they (and no wonder when they had such teachers) that,

1. They quarrelled with God for appearing against them (v. 3): *Wherefore has the Lord smitten us?* If they meant this as an enquiry into the cause of God's displeasure, they needed not go far to find that out. It was plain enough; Israel had sinned, though they were not willing to see it and own it. But it rather seems that they expostulate boldly with God about it, are displeased at what God has done, and dispute the matter with him. They own the hand of God in their trouble (so far was right): "It is the Lord that has smitten us;" but, instead of submitting to it, they quarrel with it, and speak as those that are angry at him and his providence, and not aware of any just provocation they have given him: "Wherefore shall we, that are Israelites, be smitten before the Philistines? How absurd and unjust is it!" Note, The foolishness of man perverts his way, and then his heart *frets against the Lord* (^{<0808>}Proverbs 19:3) and finds fault with him.

2. They imagined that they could oblige him to appear for them the next time by bringing the ark into their camp. The elders of Israel were so ignorant and foolish as to make the proposal (v. 3), and the people soon put it in execution, v. 4. They sent to Shiloh for the ark, and Eli had not courage enough to detain it, but sent his ungodly sons, Hophni and Phinehas, along with it, at least permitted them to go, though he knew that wherever they went the curse of God went along with them. Now see here,

(1.) The profound veneration the people had for the ark. “O send for that, and it will do wonders for us.” The ark was, by institution, a visible token of God's presence. God had said that he would dwell *between the cherubim*, which were over the ark and were carried along with it; now they thought that, by paying a great respect to this sacred chest, they should prove themselves to be Israelites indeed, and effectually engage God Almighty to appear in their favour. Note, It is common for those that have estranged themselves from the vitals of religion to discover a great fondness for the rituals and external observances of it, for those that even deny the power of godliness not only to have, but to have in admiration, the form of it. The temple of the Lord is cried up, and the ark of the Lord stickled for with a great deal of seeming zeal by multitudes that have no regard at all for the Lord of the temple and the God of the ark, as if a fiery concern for the name of Christianity would atone for a profane contempt of the thing. And yet indeed they did but make an idol of the ark, and looked upon it to be as much an image of the God of Israel as those idols which the heathen worshipped were of their gods. To worship the true God, and not to worship him as God, is in effect not to worship him at all.

(2.) Their egregious folly in thinking that the ark, if they had it in their camp, would certainly *save them out of the hand of their enemies*, and bring victory back to their side. For,

[1.] When the ark set forward Moses prayed, *Rise up, Lord, and let thy enemies be scattered*, well knowing that it was not the ark moving with them, but God appearing for them, that must give them success; and here were no proper means used to engage God to favour them with his presence; what good then would the ark do them, the shell without the kernel?

[2.] They were so far from having God's leave to remove his ark that he had plainly enough intimated to them in his law that when they were settled in Canaan his ark should be settled in the place that he should choose

(~~1515~~ Deuteronomy 12:5, 11), and that they must come to it, not it to them. How then could they expect any advantage by it when they had not a just and legal possession of it, nor any warrant to remove it from its place? Instead of honouring God by what they did, they really affronted him. Nay,

[3.] If there had been nothing else to invalidate their expectations from the ark, how could they expect it should bring a blessing when Hophni and Phinehas were the men that carried it? It would have given too much countenance to their villany if the ark had done any kindness to Israel while it was in the hands of those graceless priests.

IV. The great joy there was in the camp of Israel when the ark was brought into it (v. 5): *They shouted, so that the earth rang again.* Now they thought themselves sure of victory, and therefore gave a triumphant shout before the battle, as if the day was without fail their own, intending, by this mighty shout, to animate themselves and their own forces, and to intimidate their adversaries. Note, Carnal people triumph much in the external privileges and performances of religion, and build much upon them, as if these would infallibly save them, and as if the ark, God's throne, in the camp, would bring them to heaven, though the world and the flesh should be upon the throne in the heart.

V. The consternation into which the bringing of the ark into the camp of Israel put the Philistines. The two armies lay so near encamped that the Philistines heard the shout the Israelites gave on this great occasion. They soon understood what it was they triumphed in (v. 6), and were afraid of the consequences. For,

1. It had never been done before in their days: *God has come into their camp,* and therefore *woe unto us* (v. 7), and again, *woe unto us,* v. 8. The name of the God of Israel was formidable even to those that worshipped other gods, and some apprehensions even the infidels had of the danger of contending with them. Natural conscience suggests this, that those are in a woeful condition who have God against them. Yet see what gross notions they had of the divine presence, as if the God of Israel were not as much in the camp before the ark came thither, which may very well be excused in them, since the notions the Israelites themselves had of that presence were no better. "O," say they, "this is a new design upon us, more frightful than all their stratagems, for *there has not been such a thing heretofore;* this

was the most effectual course they could take to dispirit our men and weaken their hands.”

2. When it had been done in the days of old, it had wrought wonders: *These are the gods that smote the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness*, v. 8. Here they were as much out in their history as in their divinity: the plagues of Egypt were inflicted before the ark was made and before Israel came into the wilderness; but some confused traditions they had of wonders wrought by or for Israel when this ark was carried before them, which they attributed, not to Jehovah, but to the ark. Now, say they, *Who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty gods?* taking the ark for God, as well they might when the Israelites themselves idolized it. Yet, it should seem, they scarcely believed themselves when they spoke thus formidably of *these mighty gods*, but only bantered; for instead of retreating, or proposing conditions of peace, which they would have done had they been really convinced of the power of Israel's God, they stirred up one another to fight so much the more stoutly; this surprising difficulty did but sharpen their resolution (v. 9): *Be strong, and quit yourselves like men.* The commanders inspired bold and generous thoughts into the minds of their soldiers when they bade them remember how they had lorded it over Israel, and what an intolerable grief and shame it would be if they flinched now, and suffered Israel to lord it over them.

<0040>1 SAMUEL 4:10-11

THE DEFEAT OF THE ISRAELITES

Here is a short account of the issue of this battle.

I. Israel was smitten, the army dispersed and totally routed, not retiring into the camp, as before (v. 2) when they hoped to rally again, but returning to their tents, every man shifting for his own safety and making the best of his way home, despairing to make head any more; and 30,000 were slain in the field of battle, v. 10. Israel was put to the worse,

1. Though they had the better cause, were the people of God and the Philistines were uncircumcised; they stood up in necessary defence of their just rights and liberties against invaders, and yet they failed of success, for

their rock had sold them. A good cause often suffers for the sake of the bad men that undertake it.

2. Though they had the greater confidence, and were the more courageous. They shouted, while the Philistines trembled, and yet, when God pleased so to order it, the Philistines' terrors were turned into triumphs, and Israel's shouts into lamentations.

3. Though they had the ark of God with them. External privileges will secure none that abuse them and do not live up to them. The ark in the camp will add nothing to its strength when there is an Achan in it.

II. The ark itself was taken by the Philistines; and Hophni and Phinehas, who it is likely kept close to it, and when it was in danger ventured far in the defense of it, because by it they got their living, were *both slain*, v. 11. To this sad even the Psalmist refers, ^{<1076>}Psalm 78:61. 64, *He delivered his strength into captivity, and his glory into the enemy's hands. Their priests fell by the sword.*

1. The slaughter of the priests, considering their bad character, was no great loss to Israel, but it was a dreadful judgment upon the house of Eli. The word which God had spoken was fulfilled in it (^{<1073>}1 Samuel 2:34): *This shall be a sign unto thee, an earnest of the judgments threatened, thy two sons shall die both in one day, and so shall all the increase of thy house die in the flower of their age*, v. 33. If Eli had done his duty, and *put them, as polluted, from the priesthood* (^{<1076>}Nehemiah 7:64), they might have lived, though in disgrace; but now God takes the work into his own hands, and chases them out of the world by the sword of the uncircumcised. *The Lord is known by those judgments which he executeth.* It is true the sword devours one as well as another, but these were waited for of the sword, marked for vengeance. They were out of the place; what had they to do in the camp? When men leave the way of their duty they shut themselves out of God's protection. But this was not all; they had betrayed the ark, by bringing it into danger, without a warrant from God, and this filled the measure of their iniquities. But,

2. The taking of the ark was a very great judgment upon Israel, and a certain token of God's hot displeasure against them. Now they are made to see their folly in trusting to their external privileges which they had by their wickedness forfeited them, and fancying that the ark would save them when God had departed from them. Now they are made to reflect, with the

utmost regret, upon their own rashness and presumption in bringing the ark into the camp and so exposing it, and wish a thousand times they had left it where God had fixed it. Now they are convinced that God will not be prescribed to by vain and foolish men, and that though he has bound us to his ark he has not bound himself to it, but will rather deliver it into the hands of his sworn enemies than suffer it to be profaned by his false friends, and countenance their superstition. Let none think to shelter themselves from the wrath of God under the cloak of a visible profession, for there will be those cast into outer darkness that have *eaten and drunk in Christ's presence*.

<0012> 1 SAMUEL 4:12-18

THE DEATH OF ELI

Tidings are here brought to Shiloh of the fatal issue of their battle with the Philistines. Bad news flies fast. This soon spread through all Israel; every man that fled to his tent brought it, with too plain a proof of it, to his neighbours. But no place was so nearly concerned as Shiloh. Thither therefore an express posted away immediately; it was a man of Benjamin; the Jews fancy it was Saul. *He rent his clothes, and put earth upon his head*, by these signs to proclaim the sorrowful news to all that saw him as he ran, and to show how much he himself was affected with it, v. 12. He went straight to Shiloh with it; and here we are told,

I. How the city received it. *Eli sat in the gate* (v. 13, 18), but the messenger was loth to tell him first, and therefore passed him by, and told it in the city, with all the aggravating circumstances; and now *both the ears of every one that heard it tingled*, as was foretold, <0011> 1 Samuel 3:11. Their hearts trembled, and every face gathered blackness. *All the city cried out* (v. 13), and well they might, for, besides that this was a calamity to all Israel, it was a particular loss to Shiloh, and the ruin of that place; for, though the ark was soon rescued out of the hands of the Philistines, yet it never returned to Shiloh again; their candlestick was removed out of its place, because they had *left their first love*, and their city dwindled, and sunk, and came to nothing. Now God *forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh*, they having driven him from them; and the tribe of Ephraim, which had for 340 years been blessed with the presence of the ark in it, lost the honour

(^{<1781>}Psalm 78:60, 67), and, some time after, it was transferred to the tribe of Judah, the *Mount Sion which he loved*, as it follows there (v. 68), because the men of Shiloh knew not *the day of their visitation*. This abandoning of Shiloh Jerusalem is long afterwards reminded of, and told to take warning by. (^{<2172>}Jeremiah 7:12, “Go see what I did to Shiloh. From this day, this fatal day, let the desolations of Shiloh be dated.”) They had therefore reason enough to cry out when they heard that the ark was taken.

II. What a fatal blow it was to old Eli. Let us see,

1. With what fear he expected the tidings. Though old, and blind, and heavy, yet he could not keep his chamber when he was sensible the glory of Israel lay at stake, but placed himself by the way-side, to receive the first intelligence; for *his heart trembled for the ark of God*, v. 13. His careful thoughts represented to him what a dishonour it would be to God, and what an irreparable loss to Israel, if the ark should fall into the Philistines' hands, with what profane triumphs the tidings would be told in Gath and published in the streets of Ashkelon. He also apprehended what imminent danger there was of it. Israel had forfeited the ark (his own sons especially) and the Philistines would aim at it; and now the threatening comes to his mind, that he should *see an enemy in God's habitation* (^{<1023>}1 Samuel 2:32); and perhaps his own heart reproached him for not using his authority to prevent the carrying of the ark into the camp. All these things made him tremble. Note, All good men lay the interests of God's church nearer their hearts than any secular interest or concern of their own, and cannot but be in pain and fear for them if at any time they are in peril. How can we be easy if the ark be not safe?

2. With what grief he received the tidings. Though he could not see, he could hear the *tumult and crying of the city*, and perceived it to be the voice of lamentation, and mourning, and woe; like a careful magistrate, he asks, *What means the noise of this tumult?* v. 14. He is told there is an express come from the army, who relates the story to him very distinctly, and with great confidence, having himself been an eye-witness of it, v. 16, 17. The account of the defeat of the army, and the slaughter of a great number of the soldiers, was very grievous to him as a judge; the tidings of the death of his two sons, of whom he had been so indulgent, and who, he had reason to fear, died impenitent, touched him in a tender part as a father; yet it was not for these that his heart trembled: there is a greater concern upon his spirit, which swallows up the less; he does not interrupt

the narrative with any passionate lamentations for his sons, like David for Absalom, but waits for the end of the story, not doubting but that the messenger, being an Israelite, would, without being asked, say something of the ark; and if he could but have said, "Yet the ark of God is safe, and we are bringing that home," his joy for that would have overcome his grief for all the other disasters, and have made him easy; but, when the messenger concludes his story with, *The ark of God is taken*, he is struck to the heart, his spirits fail, and, it should seem, he swooned away, fell off his seat, and partly with the fainting, and partly with the fall, he died immediately, and never spoke a word more. His heart was broken first, and then his neck. So fell the high priest and judge of Israel, so fell his heavy head when he had lived within two of 100 years, so fell the crown from his head when he had judged Israel about forty years: thus did his sun set under a cloud, thus were the folly and wickedness of those sons of his, whom he had indulged, his ruin at last. Thus does God sometimes set marks of his displeasure in this life upon good men who have misconducted themselves, that others may hear, and fear, and take warning. A man may die miserably and yet not die eternally, may come to an untimely end and yet the end be peace. Dr. Lightfoot observes that Eli died the death of an unredeemed ass, whose neck was to be broken, ^{<013>}Exodus 13:13. Yet we must observe, to Eli's praise, that it was the loss of the ark that was his death, not the slaughter of his sons. He does, in effect, say, "Let me fall with the ark, for what pious Israelite can live with any comfort when God's ordinances are removed?" Farewell all in this world, even life itself, if the ark be gone.

<013>1 SAMUEL 4:19-22

THE DEATH OF PHINEHAS' WIFE

We have here another melancholy story, that carries on the desolations of Eli's house, and the sorrowful feeling which the tidings of the ark's captivity excited. It is concerning the wife of Phinehas, one of those ungracious sons of Eli that had brought all this mischief on Israel. It cost her her life, though young, as well as that of her father-in-law, that was old; for many a green head, as well as many a hoary head, has been brought by sorrow to the grave: it worketh death. By what is here related of her it appears,

I. That she was a woman of a very tender spirit. Providence so ordered it that, just at this time, she was near her time; and our Saviour hath said, *Woe to those that are with child, or give suck, in such days as these,* ^{<1219>}Matthew 24:19. So little joy will there then be in the birth, even of a man-child, that it will be said, *Blessed are the wombs that bear not,* ^{<1223>}Luke 23:29. The amazing news coming at this unhappy juncture, it put her into labour, as great frights or other strong passions sometimes do. When she heard of the death of her father-in-law whom she revered, and her husband whom, bad as he was, she loved, but especially of the loss of the ark, *she travailed, for her pains came thickly upon her* (v. 19), and the tidings so seized her spirits, at a time when they needed all possible supports, that, though she had strength to bear the child, she, soon after, fainted and died away, being very willing to let life go when she had lost the greatest comforts of her life. Those who are drawing near to that trying hour have need to treasure up for themselves comforts from the covenant of grace, to balance, not only the usual sorrows, but any thing extraordinary that may add to the grief which they do not foresee. Faith, at such a time, will keep from fainting, ^{<1273>}Psalms 27:13.

II. That she was a woman of a very gracious spirit though matched to a wicked husband. Her concern for the death of her husband and father-in-law was an evidence of her natural affection; but her much greater concern for the loss of the ark was an evidence of her pious and devout affection to God and sacred things. The former helped to hasten her travail, but it appears by her dying words that the latter lay nearer her heart (v. 22): *She said, The glory has departed from Israel,* not lamenting so much the sinking of that particular family to which she was related as the general calamity of Israel in the captivity of the ark. This, this was it that was her grief, that was her death.

1. This made her regardless of her child. The women that attended her, who it is likely were some of the first rank in the city, encouraged her, and, thinking that her concern was mostly about the issue of her pains, when the child was born, *said unto her, Fear not, now the worst is past, for thou has borne a son* (and perhaps it was her first-born), *but she answered not, neither did she regard it.* The sorrows of her travail, if she had no other, would have been *forgotten, for joy that a man-child was born into the world.* ^{<1621>}John 16:21. But what is that joy,

(1.) To one that feels herself dying? No joy but that which is spiritual and divine will stand us in any stead then. Death is too serious a thing to admit the relish of any earthly joy; it is all flat and sapless then.

(2.) What is it to one that is lamenting the loss of the ark? Small comfort could she have of a child born in Israel, in Shiloh, when the ark is lost, and is a prisoner in the land of the Philistines. What pleasure can we take in our creature-comforts and enjoyments if we want God's word and ordinances, especially if we want the comfort of his gracious presence and the light of his countenance? *As vinegar upon nitre, so is he that sings songs so such heavy hearts.*

2. This made her give her child a name which should perpetuate the remembrance of the calamity and her sense of it. She has nothing to say to the child, only it being her province, now that her husband was dead, to name the child, she orders them to call it *I-chabod*, that is, *Where is the glory?* Or, *Alas for the glory!* or, *There is no glory* (v. 21), which she thus explains with her dying lips (v. 22): *“The glory has departed from Israel; for the ark of God is taken. Call the child inglorious, for so he is; the beauty of Israel is lost, and there appears no hope of ever retrieving it; never let the name of an Israelite, must less a priest, carry glory in it any more, now that the ark is taken.”* Note,

(1.) The purity and plenty of God's ordinances, and the tokens of his presence in them, are the glory of any people, much more so than their wealth, and trade, and interest, among the nations.

2. Nothing is more cutting, more killing, to a faithful Israelite, than the want and loss of these. If God go, the glory goes, and all good goes. Woe unto us if he depart!