

# A Formula for Failure

## 1 Samuel 4:1-11

Donkeys and oxen have given way to jets and automobiles. But after thousands of years, one thing has not changed. Huddled on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, Israel is still surrounded by enemies.

In Samuel's day, the enemy was the five-city kingdom of the Philistia. They ruled over the twelve tribes of Jacob's descendants with an iron fist, enslaving and oppressing God's people.

The Philistines did not know it, of course. But God was the one who enabled them to overcome Israel. They were merely His instruments: a whip in His holy hand to chastize His wicked, wandering people.

...the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, so that the Lord gave them into the hands of the Philistines forty years. Judges 13:1

As Samuel grew to manhood, his countrymen were still slogging through that forty-year sentence. Philistine chariots regularly rattled across the border to raid Israeli villages, confiscating anything of value and pressing young Jews into slavery.

But God never punishes those who belong to Him. His purpose in allowing sorrow and suffering in the lives of those who claim His name is not to cause pain, but to encourage them to repent and return to Him.

Near the border that separated Israel and Philistia, shields and swords rattled and chariots rumbled dust on the horizon. Israel was at war.

Determined to throw off the iron yoke the Philistines had forced on their necks, young Jews from every tribe gathered on a plain near where the world's final battle will one day take place: Megiddo.

But Israel was not to win this little war. Their tactics were splendid. And their soldiers were brave. But it was not enough.

Quite often, we who claim Christ's name are a lot like those ancient Israelis. No, enemy armies do not march against us. And foreigners do not oppress us.

But we still have an enemy who would enslave and oppress us. His savagery makes the Philistines seem mild in comparison. And his power is beyond imagination.

...our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Ephesians 6:12

Our enemy is Satan. His vast army of evil spirits seeks to oppress, addict and enslave God's children. So we march out to oppose him. But quite often, we are defeated for the very same reasons Israel failed.

## Presumptive Faith

The scriptural account is simple and straightforward. Israel's army marched out to fight the Philistines.

Now Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle and camped beside Ebenezer while the

Philistines camped in Aphek. Verse 1

Israel's army marched out with flags flying. There was a spring in their step and confidence in their eye. But they were beaten before they left their barracks.

The problem was in their hearts and their minds. It had nothing to do what they did do. Rather, their problem was what they did not do.

They did not bother to ask God if they should fight the Philistines. They simply assumed they were in God's will. After all, they were God's chosen people and the Philistines were uncircumcised pagans.

And had not God given Canaan to their forefathers? The land was theirs not Philistia's. So surely, it was the Lord's will that they fight those who opposed Him and His people.

But it is always a mistake to assume anything is God's will. The elders of Israel should have taken the time to seek the Lord's will. Samuel was already established as God's prophet. So they could have easily gone to him.

But they did not. There is no hint they even paused to pray and ask God if He wanted them to battle their oppressors. Instead, they merely marched out and went to war. And when the smoke and dust settled, the result was tragic.

The Philistines drew up in battle array to meet Israel. When the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines who killed about four thousand men on the battlefield. Verse 2

When the soldiers straggled back to camp, the elders met in council. And their conclusion shows that their presumptions did not end with failing to seek God's will.

When the people came into the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?" Verse 3

Solomon aptly described the disease which afflicted the minds of those elders. It is the same one that plagues many believers today.

When a man's folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the Lord. Proverbs 19:3 (ESV)

Still, in a sense those elders were right. Their army was defeated because God had not gone out to fight with and for them. But the real reason had nothing to do with His failure, only their own.

Years earlier, God allowed the Philistines to overcome and oppress His people. He did so because, long before Samson, God's people had started dabbling in idolatry. While they still worshiped Jehovah and presented the prescribed offerings, they also bowed down before pagan gods like Baal and Ashtaroth.

And that wasn't all. The high priest's own sons committed theft, graft and open adultery right in the tabernacle courtyard.

So Israel's elders should have looked within themselves, rather than blame God for their defeat. And if we are to be victorious over the darkness and defeat, over the addictions and oppression with which the devil would defeat us, we must do the same.

The elders were right, of course. God had not gone with them into battle. And we dare not swagger with confidence, cocksure that His Holy Spirit will go ahead of us into our own battles.

Yes, God's Spirit is always within the body of every believer. But that Spirit can be so grieved and quenched that He will not enable us to triumph over our eternal enemy. And nothing so grieves and quenches God's Spirit as sin in the lives of His people.

Do not quench the Spirit; 1 Thessalonians 5:19

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, Ephesians 4:30

Had the elders of Israel looked within themselves, the account of their little war with Philistia would have recorded a victory. But they didn't. Instead, they blamed God, not themselves, for their failure.

Introspection is always the first step we should take when we are defeated. We should prayerfully look within ourselves and search out any shred of sin and self-rule within our own hearts. And if we still see no sin, we should ask God to help us.

Search me, O God, and know my heart...and see if there is any wicked way in me, Psalm 139:23, 24 (NKJV)

God Himself had allowed Philistia to oppress Israel. He had done so because of the sin in the lives of His people. And all they had to do to be victorious is what we must also do. They needed to confess their sinfulness, turn from the wicked ways, and return to full faith in God.

If God does not empower us to defeat the devil, there is always a reason. And the reason is usually us.

## Polluted Faith

Israel's elders never even considered repenting of their sins. Instead, they came up with a clever plan to force God to join the battle.

"Let us take to ourselves from Shiloh the ark of the covenant of the Lord, that it may come among us and deliver us from the power of our enemies." So the people sent to Shiloh, and from there they carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts who sits above the cherubim; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. Verses 3-4

God had promised to dwell above the two cherubim on the gleaming gold cover of the ark of the covenant. So if they carried that big chest out onto the battlefield, God would have to come along.

It was a foolish thing to do. But there was a deeper problem with the decision. It is revealed in what those elders said.

Let us take to ourselves from Shiloh the ark of the covenant of the Lord, that it may come among us and deliver us from the power of our enemies. Verse 3

The elders did not say that God would deliver them from their enemies. No, they said it, the ark itself, would deliver them.

The problem was not limited to the elders, either. When the priests carried the ark into the army camp, the people all cheered.

As the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth resounded. Verse 5

The people agreed with the priests. With the sacred ark in their midst, they simply could not lose. It would deliver them.

The problem went to the heart of Israel's problem. The pagan people around them worshiped idol images of their gods. Those statues were not merely reminders of their gods. The pagans believed their gods were so entwined and involved with the images, they were

physically present.

That is why fear gripped the Philistine army when they heard the Israeli's shout.

When the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, "What does the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" Then they understood that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp. The Philistines were afraid, for they said, "God has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before." Verses 6-7

Every pagan army carried an image of their god into battle. Like the elders, they believed that insured their god's presence and assistance. But never before had the Philistines seen Israel do the same thing.

When Jacob's descendants first crossed the Jordan into Canaan, God commanded them to drive out all of the pagans who lived there. He did so because He knew His people's faith would be polluted by the pagan practices of Canaan's natives.

And that is just what happened. Israel had allowed the ideas of their uncircumised neighbors to pollute their faith. Quite simply, they had adopted pagan ideas and incorporated them into their faith in God.

Do not be misled. There was nothing extraordinarily depraved about the Philistines. Our society and our culture is every bit as godless as theirs was. The virtues and values, the ideals and ideas of our own society are also counter to faith in the great God of Heaven.

Our culture exalts democracy. But God's word teaches us that our Lord the one who appoints leaders over His people. And we are to be submissive to them, whoever they are.

Our society also values independence and self-reliance. But our Lord demands that we be utterly dependent upon Him. And His Word declares that we are always in danger when we choose to trust in our own wisdom and strength.

The arc of the covenant contained some simple items. And all of them were reminders of the sinfulness of God's people.

...the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden jar holding the manna, and Aaron's rod which budded, and the tables of the covenant; and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat; Hebrews 9:4\_5

The jar of manna reminded Israel that although God provided perfect food for them, they utterly loathed it. And Aaron's rod was a reminder that they also rebelled against God's sovereign leadership over them.

When some men came to Moses complaining that they, not Aaron, should lead, God was forced to prove He had chosen Aaron. So He had Moses place the wooden rods of all twelve men inside the tabernacle. And He Himself caused the rod of the man He had chosen to bud.

The stone tablets containing the ten commandments were a reminder that God's people also rejected and rebelled against God's law. Of course, the tablets in the arc were not the ones God Himself carved.

When Moses came back down the mountain, he saw that the people had given themselves to sin and were worshiping a golden calf. All the time God was giving Moses His laws, the people were reveling and rejoicing as they were disobeying them.

In his grief, Moses smashed those tablets. So God commanded him to carve a second set. And when they were finished, they were placed in the arc as a reminder of the people's sin.

Even the gold covering on the arc was reminder. Each year, the high priest would sprinkle blood on that golden lid. And the image would be complete.

God promised He would dwell above that golden covering. So when the High priest sprinkled blood upon it, the Lord saw the blood rather than the people's sin.

But pagan practices of worshiping the idol images of false gods had obliterated all of the spiritual significance of the arc. Their faith was so polluted by the concepts and culture of the sinful society around them, their faith was no longer recognizable. It had been mutated into little more than another form of idolatry. That is why they were defeated.

...the Philistines fought and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent; and the slaughter was very great, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers Verse 10

Every ocean fish swims in a salty sea. But the salt does not seep in to pollute their bodies. In like manner, Christians must swim in a sinful sea. But we must not allow it to pollute our faith. Or we will also fail.

## Proud Faith

The Philistines were frightened. They remembered ancient stories about the Hebrews.

Woe to us! Who shall deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who smote the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. Verse 8

The tales the Philistines had heard had become twisted and warped with generations of telling. They did not realize the arc did not even exist when the plagues withered Egypt's resolve to keep Jacob's descendants in slavery. And Egypt's downfall did not happen in the desert wilderness.

But one thing they heard was clear and correct. Those old stories spoke of God's great power. And that sent a shiver up their spines. Still, the stories of what happened long ago were not unlike myths they heard about other idols. So they swallowed their fear and fought on.

Take courage and be men, O Philistines, or you will become slaves to the Hebrews, as they have been slaves to you; therefore, be men and fight. Verse 9

When the battle was over, the armies of Philistia gathered up their weapons and grinned. They had trembled with fear for no reason. The God of Israel was not nearly as powerful as they had heard.

In the end, the problem that brought Israel to a bloody defeat was pride. They were too proud to face their own sin. They were too proud to admit they were totally dependent upon God. And they were too proud to fall down before God and confess their sins.

For them, it was much easier to trust in forms and rituals. And if they did come up short, they simply blamed God. Never themselves.

And that isn't all. They were also too proud to obey God's Word. He had commanded that the arc was to remain at the tabernacle. The people were to come to it. It was not to be brought out to the them.

But the elders rejected those old commandments. They had a better idea. And as it always is when men second guess God, the result was defeat. We can count on it. If we do not obey God's Word and do things the way He has commanded us, our fate will be no better than Israel's.

The Philistines dipped their swords and spears in poison. So even a flesh wound was fatal. And when the dust settled, thirty thousand young Jews lay dead.

But Israel's army was not the only one who was defeated that day. God was also defeated in the minds of those who did not know Him.

Unbelievers in Canaan expected the God of Israel to be powerful. After all, that is what the old stories said. But when God's people are proud and full of sin, He never blesses their battles.

When that happens, our blessed Savior is scorned. And those who are outside of His love remain outside. Only Satan wins.

There was a reason why the elders' scheme failed, of course. Yes, God had promised to dwell above the arc. But in His grief and disgust over His people's sin, He had abandoned the arc.

When God heard, He was filled with wrath and greatly abhorred Israel; so that He abandoned the dwelling place at Shiloh, the tent which He had pitched among men, and gave up His strength to captivity and His glory into the hand of the adversary. Psalm 78:59\_61

So the Philistines were wrong when they cried, "God is in the camp." God is never in our camp when men are full of pride and sin. He honors those who are humble and whose hearts are completely His.

And only them.