

“The Lost Ark,” 1 Samuel 4:1-11, 5:1-7, 6:1-3, 7-12 (September 13, 2015)

And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. <sup>2</sup> The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. <sup>3</sup> And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, “Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.”

<sup>4</sup> So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

<sup>5</sup> As soon as the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. <sup>6</sup> And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, “What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?” And when they learned that the ark of the LORD had come to the camp, <sup>7</sup> the Philistines were afraid, for they said, “A god has come into the camp.” And they said, “Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. <sup>8</sup> Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness. <sup>9</sup> Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight.”

<sup>10</sup> So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. <sup>11</sup> And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. <sup>2</sup> Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. <sup>3</sup> And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. <sup>4</sup> But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. <sup>5</sup> This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

<sup>6</sup> The hand of the LORD was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory. <sup>7</sup> And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, “The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god.”

The ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months. <sup>2</sup> And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, “What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us with what we shall send it to its place.” <sup>3</sup> They said, “If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a

guilt offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why his hand does not turn away from you.”

<sup>7</sup> Now then, take and prepare a new cart and two milk cows on which there has never come a yoke, and yoke the cows to the cart, but take their calves home, away from them.

<sup>8</sup> And take the ark of the LORD and place it on the cart and put in a box at its side the figures of gold, which you are returning to him as a guilt offering. Then send it off and let it go its way <sup>9</sup> and watch. If it goes up on the way to its own land, to Beth-shemesh, then it is he who has done us this great harm, but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that struck us; it happened to us by coincidence.”

<sup>10</sup> The men did so, and took two milk cows and yoked them to the cart and shut up their calves at home. <sup>11</sup> And they put the ark of the LORD on the cart and the box with the golden mice and the images of their tumors. <sup>12</sup> And the cows went straight in the direction of Beth-shemesh along one highway, lowing as they went. They turned neither to the right nor to the left, and the lords of the Philistines went after them as far as the border of Beth-shemesh.

## PRAY

We are working our way through the book of 1 Samuel this fall – this is the Old Testament book where God first gives his people, Israel, a king. It’s an introduction to the time of kings in Israel. But the first several chapters of 1 Samuel are properly understood as the very end of the rule of judges in Israel, and this period of the judges was a time of moral chaos and spiritual confusion in the land. And few stories better illustrate just how confused Israel was when it came to spiritual matters than our text for today, where we read about the ark of the covenant.

What was the ark? The ark was a sacred object in Israel. God gave specific instructions to Moses in Exodus 25 for its construction. It was a fairly small box – about 2 ½ feet by 3 ½ feet - it was overlaid with gold. But what made it so sacred to the worship in Israel was the cover of the ark. It was called the mercy seat, it was a slab of pure gold, with two angelic creatures (the cherubim) molded on top of it. When the priests of Israel first set the ark down inside the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle, the innermost room of that tent, we read in Exodus 40 that the glory cloud – the physical presence of God on earth – filled the whole temple, and the glory cloud was centered on the mercy seat between the cherubim.

The ark of the covenant was the central location for worship in ancient Israel; it was the holiest place on earth for God’s people. But in our text for today we will see how the Israelites lost the ark. Now, there will be no raiders in the sermon today, only a lost ark. No Indiana Jones or Nazis, just the lost ark. But through this text about the ark we get tremendous insight into the character of the God whose glory dwelled above the mercy seat.

Three things about God: first, God cannot be manipulated by his people. Second, God will not be mocked by his enemies. Third, God longs to show mercy to all.

First, God cannot be manipulated by his people. We read at the beginning of chapter four that God's people, Israel, are at war with the Philistines. The Philistines lived on the Mediterranean coast just to the west of Israel, and for a period of a few hundred years, the Philistines and the Israelites were pretty much in constant conflict.

In verse 2, we read that the Philistines triumphed in round one with Israel, killing four thousand men. So the Israelites regrouped, and reevaluated their war effort. And we read this in verse 3: <sup>3</sup> And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies."

You can just see the wheels turning in the minds of the Israelite generals: "What were we thinking? We have the ark of the covenant! This is the same ark that stopped the Jordan River from flowing while in flood, so that the people of Israel could enter the Promised Land on dry ground! The God enthroned above the mercy seat between the cherubim is the same God who struck down the Egyptians with ten plagues so that we would be set free from our slavery! All we need to do is carry the ark into battle with us and, next time, our enemies won't have such an easy time of it." The Israelites thought they had the early Iron Age equivalent of a nuclear weapon on their hands, and they were going to detonate it between Ebenezer and Aphek, and crack some Philistine skulls in the process.

Yet, what wound up happening? The Israelites carried the ark into battle, but the Philistines won round two anyway, and this time they killed 30,000 Israelites and struck Israel so hard their army disintegrated (that's what "every man fled to his tent" in verse 10 means, no Israelite soldier was left to fight), they killed Eli's two corrupt sons, Hophni and Phineas, and they captured the ark of the covenant.

How could this be? What went wrong? *The Israelites thought they could manipulate God.* They thought if they just pushed the right buttons – if they just carried the ark into battle with them – then God had to do what they wanted. They apparently assumed God did not have a mind of his own or a will of his own – God was their genie, the ark the bottle, and if they just rubbed it the right way they'd get what they want.

Note: the Israelites do not pray to God before they take the ark into battle, they do not worship God, they do not offer sacrifices, they don't confess sin, they do not even inquire of Samuel the prophet (and verse 1 tells us that by this point all Israel knew he was a prophet). They just take the ark and run, as if God were this impersonal source of power, kind of like The Force in Star Wars. The Force, you know, is out there somewhere, and if you know how to manipulate it you can use it for your own purposes. You bring the good or the evil to The Force, because it doesn't have a mind or a will of its own. By the way, that's the pagan view of religion. The deities are up there in heaven and you give

them bribes to get them to do what you want, but they don't care how their power is used. They just want the bribe.

But, boy, did Israel learn a lesson that day between Ebenezer and Aphek. The silence from God that day was deafening, and the message was, "I am God, there is none other, *and I will not be manipulated*. I have a will and a purpose and a plan of my own in the world, and I do not conform to your plans for your life – *you conform to my plans for your life*."

Now, here's what I want you to see: Christian friends, we do the very same thing all the time. We are all quick to say we want God's will for our life, God's plans for our life – we say we want our hearts to be totally submissive to him. But then we read verses like Jeremiah 29:11: <sup>11</sup> For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." And we say, "Yeah, God has plans for me!" And we make the mistake of thinking that the plans God has for us must be plans for our earthly pleasure and our earthly success. *And we are constantly tempted to think that if just push all the right buttons in our spiritual lives – keep away from all the big sins, attend church regularly, pray, give our money away, volunteer a little bit – then God must have a very pleasurable future in store for us*. And the more our hopes and plans look really "spiritual" and "sacrificial," then all the more God must be ready to make them happen.

Years ago I heard the story of a young woman who while in high school in the years after World War I surrendered to become a long-term, lifetime missionary to China. That is certainly a spiritual and sacrificial plan for one's life. She had a very strong sense of calling. And she did everything she could do to get ready. She contacted a missions agency and asked them what she needed to do in order to be a missionary. And they told her, "You must have two things for us to send you to China: first, you must get trained. You've got to have a good background in Bible, Greek, Hebrew, theology, cross-cultural work. Must be very well trained. Second, you must get married." Mission agencies didn't send single women off to China – it was very dangerous there and there were cultural reasons why single women couldn't operate openly in China.

So at the end of high school, this young lady sat on her bed and prayed, "I give you my life. I'm ready to go and sacrifice and leave comfort and family behind and serve you in the most dangerous place. I just need one thing from you ... a husband."

So she went to Bible college – not good preparation for many things, but wanted Bible, languages, theology, cross-cultural training, then she spent two years at seminary getting further training in these areas.

But all throughout college, no boyfriend, no husband, no prospects. Then, after two years of seminary – no husband, no boyfriend, no prospects. And on the night before she was to graduate, she sat down in her dorm room a bitter young woman. She said, "God, how can you do this to me? I have nowhere else to go. I'm not prepared to do anything else. I only asked for one thing – how could you withhold it? What happened, God?"

Then she realized – she thought she had given God her life, but she hadn't. *She realized that instead of having a submissive heart before the Lord, she had a manipulative heart, trying to force the Lord into giving her what she wanted out of life – which for her was a life that looked noble, brave, exciting as a foreign missionary.*

Now, let me ask you: if that earnest, sincere young woman somehow confused trying to follow God's will with trying to manipulate God's will, do you think you're immune to it? Do I think I am? Of course not. You may not be trying to manipulate God to get you on the mission field, but what about manipulating God into getting married? Or into some success for your children? Or into a job you really want? Or to get your spouse to treat you better? And you say to yourself things like, "If I have this Lord, just this one thing, then I can really serve you!" Haven't you ever thought deep in your heart, "If I live a good enough life, God's got to give me what I want" and then get mad and bitter when it doesn't happen?

God does have a plan for your life. It's a plan that is for your good, it will be for the praise of his grace, and at the end of it he will make you into someone more glorious and wonderful than you can right now possibly imagine. *But it is a plan you would never willingly choose, and at many places along the way it will be incredibly difficult.* "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" Romans 11:33.

And nothing I know better describes how God does this than an old hymn written by John Newton: "I asked the Lord that I might grow, in faith and love and every grace; might more of his salvation know, and seek more earnestly his face. T'was he who taught me thus to pray, and He I trust has answered prayer; but it has been in such a way as almost drove me to despair.

"I hoped that in some favored hour, at once he'd answer my request; and by his love's constraining power, subdue my sins and give me rest. Instead of this he made me see, the hidden evils of my heart; and let the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every part.

Yea, more with own hand he seemed intent to aggravate my woe; crossed all the fair designs I schemed; [cast down] my feelings, and laid me low. 'Lord, why is this?' I trembling cried; 'Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?' 'Tis in this way,' the Lord replied, 'I answer prayers for grace and faith.'

"These inward trials I employ, from self and pride to set thee free; to break thy schemes of earthly joy [that's us], that thou mayest find thine all in me." Friends, don't try to grab the ark and manipulate God into what you want him to do (have your hopes and dreams for your life, but hold onto them very loosely). Instead, trust the Lord and always seek to submit your heart to his will, begging him to lead you precisely where he would have you to go, and he will.

Second, God cannot be mocked by his enemies. I love the first part of 1 Samuel 5, and how the Lord God, Jehovah God, totally embarrasses God of the Philistines. The Philistines capture the ark in battle, so they celebrate by mocking God and setting the ark on the ground next to their god Dagon, as if to say, “The God of Israel lies defeated beneath the God of Philistia.” But then they wake up the next morning, and Dagon lies at the feet of the ark! The next day, after they stand him back up again (and what a pathetic god that is, that his people have to set him upright), he is broken into pieces at the foot of the ark. Dagon utterly defeated by the Lord. But that’s not all – tumors start breaking out all over the Philistines. They are dying left and right of some horrible plague (which most scholars think was something akin to the bubonic plague). And the five cities of Philistia comically try to pass the ark of the covenant off on one another, like it’s some fruitcake you got for Christmas that you’re trying to regift, until finally the people of Ekron come out and say, “Enough! Send that thing away from here! It will kill us all!”

What does this text tell us? God cannot be mocked! “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked ...” Galatians 6:7. His enemies cannot triumph over him.

Now, how do we apply this? Who are the enemies of God’s people today? Who are you visualizing? If you’re picturing your mother-in-law, that’s wrong – stop it. Probably it’s not helpful to picture Dan Mullen, or Les Miles, or Nick Saban. They are not the enemies of God’s people. You know, you shouldn’t even picture in your mind the soldiers of ISIS or Boko Haram (more on that in a minute).

Who is the enemy of God’s people? It’s Satan! And you know he had to think his ultimate victory was getting the Son of God, Jesus Christ, nailed to the cross. We know Satan showed up when Jesus first began his earthly ministry, because the Bible tells us Satan met Jesus in the wilderness to tempt him, but he couldn’t lead Jesus astray. We read in Luke 4:13, “<sup>13</sup> And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

Three years later, you know Satan thought the opportune time finally came. He manipulated the Pharisees, the chief priests, the Romans and even one of the disciples into nailing the Lord Jesus to the cross. Satan knew Jesus was the incarnate Son of God, and you know he had to think that finally, finally, he had scored a huge victory against the God whom he hated.

But God cannot be mocked! I love how S.M. Lockridge, Baptist preacher, puts it in his Easter weekend meditation: “It’s Friday, Hope is lost, Death has won, Sin has conquered, and Satan’s just a laughin’. It’s Friday, but Sunday’s comin’.” What is Lockridge talking about? The resurrection! “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God [not Satan’s plan], you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. <sup>24</sup> [But] God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.” Acts 2:22-24.

During his time on earth Jesus Christ lived a perfect life (a life you and I are supposed to live, but don't), and on the cross he died a horrible death (a death you and I deserve to die), and if we believe that God loved us enough to send Jesus to live and die for us, and if we do believe that it was impossible for death to hold Jesus, that he lives today, triumphant over sin, the devil, and death itself, we will be saved. We will receive all the blessings Jesus earned by his life, we will inherit heaven and earth, the Bible says, and be loved forever as children of God. We simply must trust the good news that Jesus lived and died in our place, as our substitute.

Do you believe that? I pray you do. But here's the main point: God cannot be mocked! His plans cannot be frustrated! No one can possibly stand in the way of his purposes in the world! And he will turn what look like even the greatest possible victories of his enemies (the Philistines capturing the ark of the covenant, the devil working to kill Jesus Christ) into their complete defeat and undoing and, even, destruction.

This is what the New Testament says actually happened to the devil when Jesus Christ died on the cross. "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, <sup>14</sup> by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross [there's the salvation I just described for all who trust that Jesus died in their place on the cross. Then, verse 15]. <sup>15</sup> He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him." Colossians 2:13-15.

The devil thought he'd won the final battle against God on the cross, but instead it only led to his open shame, his being disarmed, and ultimately his destruction. God cannot be mocked.

Now, friends, will you please reason from the greater to the lesser for just a moment? If God can bring good, tremendous good, out of the crucifixion of the Son of God (which must be considered the ultimate evil ever to occur on earth), *then don't you think it's at least possible that he can bring good out of whatever pain you're enduring right now?* Some of you I know are hurting badly today – because of a disappointment in your life, a betrayal in a relationship, a failure at school or work, or a disease in your body or brain. You are in pain, but do you believe that you are one of his people? If you are suffering and you, right this moment, don't feel God's love for you (and that's possible), then at least you can tell yourself: "I know I'm one of God's people, because I know God's my only hope. I know I'm a sinner, and that only Jesus can save me. So even if I don't feel his love right now I can be sure of this: *my God will not be mocked, and he will not lose one of his people over this!* Yes, I'm hurting now, I don't feel God's love now, but I know his character! He is not a God that loses battles, or loses any of his people who count on him, and I'm counting on him; he will deliver me. I will wait on the Lord to renew my strength, to cause me to mount up on wings like eagles, to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint, because my God cannot be mocked!"

Third, God longs to show mercy to all. The Philistines are dying left and right, and they

realize it's because they've made themselves a stench in the nostrils of the God of Israel.

And so they try to *repent for their sins* by returning the lost ark to Israel. They don't ask Israel how to return the ark, so they just make it up the protocol as they go along. They decide to make gold replicas of mice and their tumors and put them in the ark, they put the ark on an oxcart, and hitch that cart to two cows that 1) have calves and 2) have never been yoked, and if the cows take off for Israel then they'd know God accepted their repentance. Now, cows with an udder full of milk would never leave their calves. My dad raised cows when I was a boy and whenever we'd pen up a calf to fatten it up by for a week or two before we'd take the calf to the meat locker for slaughter, the cow that calf belonged to would always stay right there by the pen, on the other side of the fence, lowing and mooing all the while. Cows would never walk away from their calves. But these did, and the Philistines took it to mean that God accepted their repentance. And that's what happened.

Even though the Philistines were bad, bad people. They wanted to do horrible things to Israel, to God's people. We read that when the Philistines invaded the land the people of Israel were so terrified they went and hid in caves. Yet, when the Philistines turned from their ways and acknowledged their guilt, even though they did not handle the ark the way it was supposed to be handled (in 2 Samuel 6 we read that Israel handed it in a similar fashion, and God struck people dead as a result), *still God accepted their repentance*. We do not read any more of the plague in Philistia – apparently, once the Philistines made their first attempt to repent and return the ark of the covenant to Israel, God relented and the plague stopped.

I said earlier that when we visualize the enemies of God and his people we shouldn't primarily think of Boko Haram, or ISIS, even though they are modern-day Philistines. *They, too, want to destroy God's people*. This past week was the fourteenth anniversary of 9/11. Remember where you were that day? But friends, when we think of God's enemies we shouldn't even visualize the 9/11 attackers. They were America's enemies, and we should thank God daily for our military who goes after them, but they are not really the enemies of God's people.

Paul says in Ephesians 6 that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, about the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. People who do wicked things, like 9/11 attackers, are not, fundamentally, God's enemies. They are, fundamentally, prisoners of war. They have been blinded by the god of this age, the devil (that's 2 Corinthians 4), and they are captives to his will, and they do his bidding because their hearts and souls are bound to him. ***And therefore God longs to show mercy to them, to all, even to the worst of the worst, because he is a gracious, loving, and compassionate God.***

Friends, the most basic message of Christianity to all people, no matter what they've done, is, "Come, and welcome!" Did you know that? You might think, "But, J.D., how can I be sure God will welcome me? I've done some really bad things."

In the Old Testament, the old covenant, God's people approached God through the ark. Once a year, the High Priest of Israel went into the Most Holy Place, where the ark was, and he sprinkled the blood of a bull on the top of the ark, the mercy seat, signifying the need for someone to pay for our sins. But, you never knew whether that blood could really help you with God, because it was just the blood of a bull. How could it help? But now, in the New Testament, we don't approach God through an ark, *but through a table, the Lord's table*. And we don't sprinkle blood on it. Rather, we take from it the bread and the cup, symbolizing the body and the blood of Jesus, and we eat it with a full assurance of faith saying, "If Jesus went to the cross for me, if he had his body broken and his blood shed on the cross in the place of sinners like me, then I know I can come to him and find mercy, no matter what I've done, no matter what my sin, because he has paid for them! His blood can make the foulest clean!" Friends, the most important thing any of you can do this morning is to acknowledge your sin before God – admit that you are guilty of pride, arrogance, lust, lying, greed, hurting others, and hurting yourself. But if you will just do that, even if this morning is the first time you've ever admitted your guilt, then come and welcome to the Lord's table, and find that God will in Jesus Christ have nothing but mercy, and love, and grace and peace for you forever. AMEN.