Quarter Theme: Generations—From Canaan to Jerusalem

November Theme: From Judges to Kings

November 8, 2026 "The Ark is Lost" 1 Samuel 4:12-22
Lesson 2

Intro

The year during which today's passage takes place involves a lot of transition for Israel. They are moving from Eli to Samuel as their judge/leader. And the ark of the covenant will be lost in battle to the Philistines.

The ark has been central to Israel's identity for nearly four centuries by today's passage. It moved with them though the wilderness; it encouraged them by its presence when they crossed the Jordan River. It was set up in Shiloh by Joshua. Shiloh was centrally located in Israel, reasonably accessible to all twelve tribes. The ark was in Shiloh for the majority of those four centuries.

During the latter part of the judges period, the Philistines became a major opponent of Israel. Leading into today's passage, the Israelites are battling the Philistines again. Their army is defeated by the Philistines in a two-day battle, with Israel losing 4000 men on the first day. The leaders wonder why they lost, and conclude it is because the ark wasn't with them. So they send men to Shiloh to get the ark. The men bring the ark, with Eli's two evil sons Hophni and Phineas accompanying it. The ark at first intimidates the Philistines, but also inspires them to fight harder. On the second day of the battle, Israel loses an additional 30,000 soldiers, Eli's two sons die, and the ark is captured by the Philistines.

Read 1 Samuel 4:12-22

1. vs. 12: The battle took place about 20 miles away from Shiloh
    - This Benjamite took at least 3-4 hours to get from the battle to there
    - He has torn clothes and dust on his head
        - This is a common way of expressing grief or mourning in the Middle East
        - Anyone seeing him approach would understand his news wasn't good

2. vs. 13: We see Eli's posture and attitude as the messenger arrives
    - Eli is sitting next to the road, obvious intent on getting new as quickly as it arrives
    - His heart "feared" for the Ark; he has concerns about what may happen to it
    - His active watching and concern are somewhat ironic
        - He was previously much less concerned about the actions of his two sons
        - He failed to control them, showing little concern for God's warnings
    - Interestingly, the messenger enters the town and tells the people first what happened
        - We would expect him to tell Eli, the leader of Israel, before telling the people
        - Naturally, the people cry out in grief at the deaths and the loss of the ark

3. vs. 14-15: Eli is blind by this time, but he hears the noisy response of the people to the news
    - Eli isn't just wondering by what he says; he is commanding to be told
    - This is why the man "hurried over" to Eli

We are told that Eli is 98 years old at this time

4. vs. 16: The man first tells that he fled from the battle just that day
    This action could be cause to charge him with cowardice or even treason
    It is possible that he was designated to bear the battle news back to Shiloh
    Eli wants to know about the battle, not just why the man has come from the battle

5. vs. 17: The man gives the key points of what happened, going from bad to worse in order
    Israel has suffered "heavy losses"; this would be hard news for Eli to hear
    Worse for Eli is that both of his sons are among the dead
        God has warned Eli of coming disaster to his house for not reproving his sons
    The final news is the worst: the ark of God has been taken by the Philistines
        It will not be coming home; the tabernacle will be missing its highlight element
    In the ancient world, capturing the enemies' gods showed superiority over those people
        The ark symbolized God's presence and his provision for His people
        The Philistines take it to mean that Israel's God is not fearful or almighty
        Israel sees it raising the question, "Has God's presence left us?"

6. vs. 18: We find here that Eli was sitting at the entrance to the city, at the city gate
    The bad news he gets physically shakes him, so that he falls off his chair
        This looks similar to a seizure or a stroke in today's world
    We saw in vs. 15 that he was 98 years old; now we find that he was overweight as well
    The combination of these two factors lead to his death when he falls, breaking his neck
    The ending is that "He had led Israel for forty years"
        40 years is essentially one generation
        Eli has been influential for a whole generation of Israelites
    Now that Eli has died, Samuel will take the position of judge and priest

7. vs. 19: Phineas' wife has similar physical reactions to the bad news as Eli had
    She goes into labor upon hearing the news
    She grieves all three disasters, and two of them are very personal to her
    She has lost her husband, and her father-in-law, as well as the ark of God

8. vs. 20: The midwives attending the birth try to encourage Phineas' wife
    The birth of a son was usually greeted with joy
        A son would care for his mother after the father died
        A son ensures the family name will continue
    But Phineas' wife is beyond caring; she doesn't "pay any attention" to their words

9. vs. 21: Father's in this culture typically name newborns, but this child is now fatherless
    His mother names the boy "Ichabod" which literally means "Where is the glory?"
    In the OT, God's "glory" often refers to His manifested presence
        When Moses came off the mountain, God's glory was reflected on him
    Phineas' wife translates that battlefield losses in a very negative way
    She gives the name Ichabod, showing she sees God's presence as gone

10. vs. 22: She basically repeats what she said in the first half of vs. 21

The repetition brings at least two significant things to the study

First, she "said" that the ark's capture means God's glory has left them

This view may be held by many in Israel, not just this woman

This is a woman in deep despair over the deaths in her family

Just because she says/believes this doesn't make it the truth

Second, the name Ichabod expresses her disappointment that God failed them

He didn't deliver the army as they had hoped He would

Application: The series of negative events that leads to today's passage can be traced to a good question and a wrong answer in 1 Samuel 4:3. The good question, asked after the first battle defeat, was "Why did the Lord bring defeat on us from the Philistines?" The wrong answer they come up with is "Let's bring the ark so that He may go with us and save us." Israel will use a physical object later as a "good luck charm" (see Jer. 7:4, Ezek. 13:18-20). What happened here to Israel and to Eli specifically should have been received as a message: God will not be used or manipulated. Let us examine our choices and responses to see if we are doing something similar, and trying to "use" God or manipulate Him for our own purposes.

Prayer: Father God, we repent of the times we've tried to manipulate You for our advantage. In Your mercy, please forgive us for our arrogance. Help us to submit to Your will and Your way. May we desire, like our Lord Jesus, "Not my will, but Yours be done." In Jesus' name, Amen.