

The Departure of the King

1. Intro & Context

- Have you ever wondered what it would take for God to withdraw his presence from us a church
 - What it would take for God to withdraw his presence from us a church
 - Not as individuals ... but us collectively
- Israel didn't have to wonder
- In the OT book of Samuel that we are working our way through this term
 - It's set about 1000 years before Christ
 - It describes the time when Israel transitions
 - from the being ruled by regional judges, like Samson and Gideon ...
 - to the soon to be instituted monarchy with Kings Saul and David
- The book of Judges ends with these words
 - Judges 21:25 - *In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.*
 - In other words ... Israel is in chaos - spiritually, politically and morally
- Ch 1-3 we see God raising up a prophet called Samuel who brings the word of God to Israel
- This was critical ...
 - because under Israel's previous leadership *'the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.'* (3:1)
 - God's answer to their crisis was to send a prophet who would once more bring God's word to his people
- But the arrival of Samuel is no silver bullet
 - There are still problems with the Israelites
 - And this is evident here Ch 4
 - Things are so bad ...
 - Israel is so dishonouring of God and contemptuous towards him ...
 - God removes his presence from them
 - God leaves them and departs from Israel
- Let's see why

2. God's presence abused

- v1 – Israelites go out to fight the Philistines
 - Philistines lived along the coast to the west of Israel

- They were in the land when Israel entered the Promised Land ... and Israel has been unable to properly defeat them
- v2 – And on this day Israel suffered defeat at the hands of the Philistines
- v3 – The Israelites don't understand how this could happen
 - *When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, "Why did the LORD bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines?"*
- The elders are asking the right question because they understand God's sovereignty
 - They get that it was the Lord who brought the defeat on them
 - What they didn't understand is ... how could God allow them to lose?
- After all ...
 - They're God's chosen people!
 - This is the land God has promised them!
 - These are the people God has commanded us to remove from the land!
- Why God, aren't you giving us the victory, Lord?

- After that first defeat the elders asked the right question
 - But they answered too quickly
 - They should have waited for the Lord to answer them
 - Then perhaps the words of Leviticus 26:17 and Deuteronomy 28:25 would have come to mind ... that God would hand Israel over to their enemies if they reject his laws and fail to keep covenant with the Lord

- Instead they take matters into their own hands
 - *Let us bring the ark of the LORD's covenant from Shiloh, so that it may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies."*

- If you were here last week, remember we were explaining the Ark of the Covenant is the gold covered chest that houses the 10 Commandments
 - 10 Commandments is the covenant agreement between God and Israel that defines how they're to be in relationship with each other
 - In addition, the lid that sat on top of the Ark had these two magnificent cherubim with their wings outstretched over the cover of the ark
 - But even more significantly, as our writer tells us in v4 - *the ark of the covenant of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim.*

- The ark of the covenant of the LORD was therefore of massive importance to Israel because it symbolised God's power and presence amongst his people

- And so
 - When the Israelites left Mt Sinai, it was the ark that that led them through the desert as a means of protection and guidance
 - When the Israelites needed to cross the Jordan river to enter the Promised Land ... it was the ark that went before them and caused the waters to be parted
 - When God instructed them to capture the city of Jericho, it was the ark that led the Israelites 7 times around the city before the walls crumbled
- In addition, all Israel's great military victories had been won for them by God himself
 - It was the Lord who defeated the Egyptian by bringing the 10 plagues upon them and rescuing them through the Red Sea
 - It was God who helped Gideon defeat the entire Midianite army with just 300 men
 - It was the Lord who went before Israel and gave them all their victories as they entered into and conquered the Promised Land

- And so the Israelite elders reasoned that if they brought the ark to their camp, then **surely** they would win the next battle ... for God was with them

- When the ark arrived in camp, the Israelites roared with anticipation
 - They knew what the ark symbolised and the power God had to give them the victory they desired

- The Philistine reaction was the opposite
- When they heard the ark had arrived in the Israelite camp, they trembled, because they knew about the great victory God had given his people over the Egyptians
 - ⁸ *Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the desert.*
- The answer to their question of course and rather ironically, is it's the LORD himself who will deliver them as he passes his judgment on Israel at the hands of the Philistines
- For not only do they win the battle they were expecting to lose ... they utterly destroyed the Israelite army
 - Before Israel lost 4000 men ... this time they lost 7 times that!
 - 30,000s foot soldiers killed in battle

- What God had done previously to the Egyptians ... he had now done to the Israelites
- Even worse ... the Ark of God was captured ... and both Eli's son's are also killed
- **Implication**
- Now why did God allow this happen?
 - Why didn't the presence of the ark and therefore, God himself, ensure an Israelite victory?
 - How could he allow such a great slaughter?
 - How could the ark itself be captured and taken into exile?
- This is an absolute disaster for Israel!
 - Is God not powerful enough to ensure the victory
 - Are the gods of the Philistines more powerful than the Lord?
- One thing for sure ... this all happened NOT because God is weak or unable to win the battle
- For as you read on in Ch 5 ... we see
 - Philistines put the ark in the temple of their god, Dagon
 - Next morning they come into the temple and the statue of Dagon is has fallen over ... and is lying flat on his face before the ark
 - The Philistines put Dagon back in place and the next morning they come back and the same thing ... fallen over, face down before the Ark
- God is making it very clear ... he's the one true God and even false gods like Dagon ought to bow down and worship him
 - Philistines might have thought their gods were victorious over the Lord that day at Ebenezer ... but the Lord is making it crystal clear who really has the power and is in control here
- And in case the Philistines didn't get it ... he inflicted them with a plague of tumours
 - NAB = haemorrhoids!
 - God has a sense of humour!
- So it's not because God was unable to defeat the Philistines
 - Rather, God allowed it to happen to fulfil what the Lord said to Eli in 1 Samuel 2:33-34
 - *your descendants will die in the prime of life.* ³⁴ *"And what happens to your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you-- they will both die on the same day.*

- This was why Israel was defeated
 - The Lord was bringing about his justice on those who turned the temple – God’s house, into a house of disgrace
- This was no failure of God’s or a lack of power
 - This was God’s judgment on Eli and his sons for their wickedness
- But it was also God’s judgement on Israel and her leaders
 - For the way the way the treated the ark of the Lord revealed the real issue is not their lack of military power or tactics ... but rather their own spiritual crisis
- The Israelites had treated the ark of the covenant like a lucky charm ... like it was a magical wand
 - They think the can simply wave this sacred object in front of the Lord and have instant success before their enemies
 - “As long as we have the ark ... then we’ll be victorious”
- They were trying to manipulate God’s power to get what they want
- Their assumption is
 - “If we bring the ark into battle ... then the Lord will be forced to deliver us to protect his honour”
 - “It will remind God of his covenant promises and save us from our enemies”
 - “He'll have to say this now, for his name’s at stake”
- It was a pressure tactic, a way of trying to twist God's arm
 - That’s not faith ... that’s superstition
 - Dale Ralph Davis calls it ‘Rabbit-foot theology’
- Ironically, rather than securing themselves a victory, bringing the ark only ensures their defeat

Application

- Friends ... this passage makes it clear God is powerful
 - He acted to bring about his justice and judgment through the Philistines
 - But it was not as Israel expected
 - Because God would not be manipulated by them to get what they wanted
- It teaches us that you cannot manipulate God’s power to get you what you want
- Just as the elders of Israel thought they could secure God’s power by taking hold of the ark of the covenant
- And it’s possible for us to think that we can secure God’s power by taking hold of Jesus

- Whether it be
 - Success > prosperity > happiness > or health
- God's power is not like that
 - It is not at our disposal
 - God's power is *God's* power

- We cannot treat our religious acts and rituals like a lucky charm
 - "As long as I do my bit ... I can rely on God to do his bit for me"
- The person who attends church every now and then
 - Is it out of desire to worship God and hear his word; or
 - Is it about ticking the box and saying I'm a church goer
- What about your prayer and Bible reading time?
 - Is it out of delight in meeting with God?
 - Is it about things going better for you?
- When a couple want to get their kids baptised and yet they hardly ever come to church
 - Because they see baptism as an insurance policy
 - They think ... "I know I don't take God but I'll get them baptised just in case I'm wrong"
- That's trying to manipulate God's power

- When we operate this way ... our concern is
 - not to seek God but to control him
 - not to submit to God but to use him

- This the difference between religion and the gospel
- Religion is the attempt by humanity to harness God's power to their own advantage
 - And this story is testimony to the fact that it can't be done
 - If the ark of the covenant could not guarantee Israel's safety, then no other religious act will do it
- Gospel says ... only Jesus can guarantee your safety before the throne of judgment ... so take hold of him

3. God's presence departs

- After the defeat to the Philistines, a messenger is dispatched to Shiloh to report the terrible news
- Eli summons the messenger of find out what has happened ... although he must have known from the wailing he could hear
- The messenger tells him

- Israel fled before the Philistines
- Suffered heavy losses > 30,000 to be precise
- Your two sons are dead ... AND
- The ark of God has been captured
- We're not told Eli's reaction to the first three bits of information
 - But at the mention of the ark's capture, Eli is so overcome ... he falls back off his chair and breaks his neck
- And so God's promise to deal justly with Eli and his sons is fulfilled

- The tragedy continues, because in v19-22, the writer gives us this little aside about the wife of Phinehas
 - There's been no mention of her until now
 - However, she's heavily pregnant
 - When she hears the news about capture of the ark and the death of Eli and her husband ... she goes into labour gives birth to a son
 - However she doesn't survive the birth
 - And as she's dying she names her son – Ichabod = "no glory" or "where is the glory"
- She explains the name in v22 by saying ...
 - *"The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."*

- What does she mean by this?

- The ark of the covenant had long been associated with the glory of God
 - In the day of Moses, a cloud had covered the tent and the glory of the Lord had filled the tabernacle
 - And we're told in Ex 40¹ that Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle because glory of the Lord had settled on it
- In other words ... it's speaking of God's presence amongst his people
- Where is the glory now?
 - Captured and taken by the Philistines
 - Exiled from Israel in Ashdod

- Phinehas wife understood the seriousness of all this
 - The ark was the most visible and powerful symbol of God's presence with amongst the Israelites
 - And so to lose the ark ... meant to lose God

¹ Exodus 40:34-35

- To lose the ark would call into question the very future of Israel
- And if God has departed Israel ... then what hope is there for her people, and in particular ... her new born son
- "Where is God's glory?" says Ichabod's mother
 - "Would it ever return?"
 - "What hope is there?"

- God is gone! He has departed!
 - Not because he's not powerful ... but because he chose to
 - The unrepentant sins of the people and in particular, the leaders, meant God could not remain amongst his people any longer
 - The two were incompatible > they were mutually exclusive
 - A holy God and unrepentant sinners cannot co-exist
- He reluctantly accepts the reality of Israel's spiritual decline and so he withdraws his presence from them

Application

- 1 Samuel 4 teaches us that God is a very holy God
 - It's a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God
 - The deaths of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas were testimony to that
 - As were the 30,000 soldiers lying on the battle field
 - The fact that God removed himself physically from the presence of Israel is testimony to that

- You don't want to meet God unforgiven
- You do not what to stand before God with only your sins between you
- Back in 1 Samuel 2:25 Eli warned his sons ...
 - *"if a man sins against the LORD, who will intercede for him?"*
- Meeting God unforgiven is a nightmare that will never end
- Like or hate ... this is what God is like
 - He's uncompromising in his holiness
 - He is impeccably holy
 - He cannot do anything other than punish sin
- God is not going on budge on this
- If you remain in your sins unforgiven ... God will remove his glory from you forever
- God will judge those, who by their choice, persist to despise him and turn their back on him
 - The person who will not hear the call of the gospel and repent ...
 - The person who continues to disregard God and his holiness ...

- God will give him what he desires ... and he will remove his presence from him

4. God's presence returns

- So how can we remain in God's glory
 - What can we do to ensure God's glory never departs from us?
- Well it starts with Jesus
 - Because while God's glory departed temporarily from Israel in the time of Samuel
 - It returned in all its fullness with the incarnation of the Lord Jesus
- Have a listen to John 1:14
 - *The Word [Jesus] became flesh and made his dwelling among us. **We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.***
- The word translated 'dwelling' ... in the original means 'tabernacle'
 - In other words, John says
 - *The word became flesh and tabernacled among us*
- Just as the ark of God represented his presence among his people was taken from the tabernacle ...
 - Now God's presence in the shape of his Son, who brings in the new covenant, tabernacles among us
 - God returned to his people ... not in the glory of the ark ... but in the glory of his son
- And John tells us ... in Christ, we have seen his glory
- The glory of God has returned in all its fullness ... in Jesus Christ
- God has not departed ... he is with us by his son, and now by his Spirit
- So how can we remain in God's glory?
 - What can we do to ensure God's glory never departs from us?
- 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14
 - ¹³ *But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴ He called you to this through our gospel, **that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.***

- You and I share in the glory of God
 - You and I remain in the presence of God
 - You and I will never have the glory of God depart from us
- How?
 - When you trust in Christ ... then through the work of the Spirit whom Jesus has sent ... you are united to Christ
 - And because you are united to Christ ... his sacrificial death atones for you sins and bring you forgiveness of your sins
 - Allowing you to stand in the presence living and holy God
- That's what Paul means when he refers to the gospel there in v14
 - This is why the gospel is such the good news

- God provided his perfect son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth, to deal with God's wrath and holiness
 - Therefore, the only thing we can do is to run to Jesus
 - You cannot stand before God with only your sins between you
 - You will not stand a chance
 - You need a saviour to stand there in your place
 - You need someone who is going die in you place for your sin
- And when you come to Jesus friends ... the sure hope you have is that
 - You will share in glory of the Lord Jesus
 - And that glory will never depart from you

- However ... here's the warning
 - Do not presume upon God's power to save you friends
 - Do not presume upon the death and resurrection of Jesus

- 1 Sam 4 teaches us we're deluded if we can think we can depend on the promises of God while not paying attention to his demands
 - You cannot put your trust God's kindness to you in Jesus Christ ... as the Israelites did with the ark entered the camp ... and at the same time ignore God's demands for holiness in your life

- The Israelites joyful trust in the ark and all it represented meant nothing –
 - It was false ... so long as they failed to pay attention to the demands of the covenant
- What that means for us is this ... you cannot have Jesus as your saviour, without having him also as your Lord

- You cannot call on God to save you ... and at the same time treat Jesus and his call on your life with contempt
- Now how are we likely to do that?
- I reckon we do it when
 - We have the mindset that the gathering each Sunday around the word of God is optional for me as a Christian
 - And we fail to remember that when Jesus Christ died ... he did it, not just save you individually into glory
 - He died for you to save you into a family > the NT refers to it as a body ... in which Christ is the head
- We show contempt when towards him when
 - We don't give any of the wealth and money God graciously gives us towards the ongoing work of the gospel
 - Or what we do give is just our leftovers ... after we've spent what we want on ourselves
- We show contempt when
 - We knowingly and willingly persist in sin and refuse to repent
 - Whether that's
 - use of porn
 - deceit
 - passive aggressiveness to those who've upset you
 - anger and fits of rage
- I'm not talking about times when you lapse in sin
 - I'm talking about sin you refuse to repent of; and
 - In which you presume upon the power of God to forgive you in Christ
- Because if you persist in that ... God will remove his presence from you and you too will be 'Ichabod'
- But when you trust in the perfect son of the Father,
 - who came in all his Father's glory, full of grace and truth
 - who was the perfect priest and perfect sacrifice who will intercede for you
- When you don't treat his grace to you with contempt ... but love him, and worship and obey him
- Then God's promise to you ... is that you will share in the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ in eternity
- For God's glory will never depart from those who trust in him

PRAY