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1 Samuel 4

“By God’s Help”

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In this study, we’ll learn about the importance of living our lives in right relationship with the Lord. We’ll also see our need to come to the Lord in repentance, confession, humility, and prayer, rather than treating God as a good-luck charm (like the Israelites and Philistines did). When we do these things we will see God show himself strong on our behalf.

Historical Background

1. The Philistines were a sea-faring people who emigrated from the Greek island of Crete, according to [Amos 9:7](#).
2. During the time of Abraham, there were small numbers of Philistines in the land, but they came in larger numbers soon after the Israelites settled in the Promised Land, after having been set free from slavery in Egypt.
3. The Philistines settled along the Mediterranean Coast of Israel, in an area known today as the Gaza Strip.
4. It’s important to note that the Palestinians are not the ancient Philistines, because the ancient Philistines have Greek roots, while the Palestinians have Arab roots.
5. The Philistines were different from Israel’s other neighbors, the Ammonites and the Moabites, in that they were more advanced militarily.
 - a. They had Greek military equipment such as helmets, shields, chain mail armor, swords and spears.

- b. They were the first people in Israel to process iron and they made the most of it in the manufacture of weaponry.
6. In the course of war with the Philistines, the Israelites lost the Ark of the Covenant, their most treasured national possession.
- a. The Ark was a small box, with these approximate dimensions: 3½ ft. long x 2 ft. wide x 2 ft. high.
 - b. The Ark was made of acacia wood and was covered with pure gold inside and out.
 - c. The lid of the Ark was called the Mercy Seat, and on it, fashioned out of gold, were two angels (cherubim), which faced each other with their wings outstretched.
 - d. The Ark was very valuable, not just materially because of the gold, but spiritually because of God.
 - e. The Ark of the Covenant symbolized the very presence of God.
 - f. [Psalm 99:1](#) - *"The Lord... sits enthroned between the cherubim..."*
 - g. The Ark was kept in the House of God (Tabernacle) in Shiloh.¹

Israel Vs. The Philistines - Round One

7. Israel's battle with the Philistines was fought in two phases.
- a. Phase 1
 - i. The Israelites attacked the Philistines, and 4,000 men were lost in their defeat.
 - ii. The Israelites regrouped and tried to come to some understanding of why they had failed in battle, and why God gave them defeat instead of victory.
 - iii. Their conclusion was basically, "We need God on our side, so we need to bring the Ark of the Covenant into battle with us, and in so doing, we'll bring God along!"
 - b. Phase 2
 - i. The two sons of Eli the priest, Hophni and Phinehas, brought the Ark into the camp of the Israelites.
 - 1. The Bible describes Eli's sons as being wicked, rebellious, greedy, and sexually immoral.
 - 2. They were killed because of their wickedness in Israel's second defeat.
 - ii. When they brought the Ark into the camp the people celebrated, because they thought, "Now we've got the magic bullet, and having the Ark of God will surely give us victory!"

¹ The Ark would later be transferred to the Temple in Jerusalem.

- iii. Once again they failed in battle and they were severely thrashed by the Philistines, and the fact is that their second defeat was worse than the first, because this time they lost 30,000 men.
- iv. This was a tragic and humiliating loss for the Israelites, and to top it off, the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant, which was subsequently taken to Ashdod.

The Ark In Ashdod

- 8. **1 Samuel 5:1-5** – *“After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then they carried the ark into Dagon’s² temple and set it beside Dagon. When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained. That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon’s temple at Ashdod step on the threshold.”*
- 9. The first morning after they placed the Ark in the temple of Dagon, the people found that the idol had fallen toward the Ark, lying in a position of worship toward God.
 - a. In toppling this statue, God, in a sense, made this “no account” idol bow down in worship to him!
 - b. By the way, any god you need to prop up is a useless god!
- 10. They propped Dagon up, but the very next morning they went into the temple to find that Dagon’s head (wisdom) and hands (strength) were broken off.
 - a. God was showing them that he was wiser and mightier than their unstable, powerless god.
- 11. At this point, the Philistines could have turned and cried out to the living God who had displayed himself as being more powerful than their false god, but they dismissed these two events as mere coincidences, and ended up making a religious tradition out of them!
 - a. By the way, your god is probably a useless god if he breaks like Humpty Dumpty!

² Dagon had the body of a fish and the head and hands of a man.

12. Sadly, there are a lot of people who are a lot like the Philistines, in that when they are confronted with the truth, they reject God, not because of the evidence; they reject God despite the evidence.
13. Up to this point in the story, both the Israelites and the Philistines treated the Ark of the Covenant like a good-luck charm, similar to a lucky rabbit's foot.
 - a. We can't live like we please and pull God out of our pockets every time we find ourselves in a bad place, because God won't "perform" for us; God is not a good-luck charm.
 - b. The power and the presence of God are realized in a relationship with him.
 - c. God will not allow himself to be manipulated by the Israelites or hijacked by the Philistines for either of their self-serving interests.
 - d. God will allow himself to be treated like a good-luck charm, and he definitely will not be placed on par with any god.
14. [1 Samuel 5:6](#) - *"The Lord's hand was heavy upon the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastations upon them and afflicted them with tumors."*
 - a. The KJV uses the word "emeroths," which translates as hemorrhoids!
15. After the Lord inflicted them with hemorrhoids, the Philistines put the Ark of the Covenant on a cart drawn by cows and sent it back into Israelite territory.
16. [1 Samuel 6:15](#) - *"The Levites took down the ark of the Lord, together with the chest containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. On that day the people of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the Lord."*
 - a. The Ark was later relocated to Kiriath Jearim, where it remained for 20 years until King David had it brought to Jerusalem.

Israel Vs. The Philistines - Round Two

17. [1 Samuel 7:2-13a](#) tells the story of how God gave the Israelites victory over the Philistines.
18. In their previous battles against the Philistines, the Israelites were defeated and humiliated, and 34,000 men died; but this time they were prepared, God helped them win the victory, and no one died!
19. There is a marked difference between the accounts given in [1 Samuel 4](#) and [1 Samuel 7](#).
 - a. Chapter four is about using God, and chapter seven is about knowing God.

- b. Chapter four is expecting God to perform, and chapter seven is about pleading with God to forgive.
 - c. Chapter four is about being self-centered, and chapter seven is about being God-centered.
 - d. Chapter four is about regrouping from defeat, and chapter seven is about repenting from sin.
 - e. Chapter four is about pride, and chapter seven is about humility.
 - f. Chapter four is about vanity, while chapter seven is about victory.
20. In **1 Samuel 7**, God showed himself strong on behalf of his people because they sought him with repentance, fasting, confession, humility, and prayer, and when they cried out to God with a contrite heart, he responded with his love and grace.
21. To honor God and commemorate the moment, Samuel set up a stone and called it Ebenezer, which means, stone of help.³
- a. **1 Samuel 7:12b** - *“He named it Ebenezer, saying, ‘Thus far has the Lord helped us.’ ”*
 - b. Samuel was saying, in effect, “We may not have always done things right, but we’ve come this far by God’s help!”

Discussion Questions

1. Review the introduction to the study guide with your group to provide the appropriate background.
2. Read **1 Samuel 4:1-11** to provide an overview for this study.
3. Spend time talking about the ways people treat God as though he was a good-luck charm or a “fire insurance policy” they can bring out when they find themselves in trouble.
4. How has the Lord toppled idols in your life?
5. Review the comparison between the outcomes in **1 Samuel 4** and **1 Samuel 7**. (See #19 above)
 - a. Share examples of times when you found yourself in chapter four and times when you’ve found yourself in chapter seven.
6. Allow the people in your group to share their “Ebenezer” moments when they realized that it was only by God’s grace and help that they’ve made it to this

³ The Hebrew is Ebhen ha’zer, which translates eben (stone) ezer (help).

point in life. (See #21 above)

- a. Review the lyrics from the 1758 hymn written by Robert Robinson, titled *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*.
7. Close your time in prayer by asking the Holy Spirit to help each person: live their life in relationship with God; refrain from treating God like a good-luck charm; come to God with repentance, confession, humility, and prayer, so they'll see how God will show himself strong on their behalf.

* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New International Version (NIV 1984).