

Opening Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:19–21

Introduction: In the 2004 NBA Finals, the heavily favored Los Angeles Lakers, with their star-studded lineup featuring Kobe Bryant, Shaquille O'Neal, Gary Peyton, and Karl Malone (they were all getting older, but still hall-of-famers), were on the brink of clinching yet another championship. Their opponents, the dreadful Detroit Pistons (ugggh), were seen by many as the underdogs—a team without the star power, the pizzazz, or the legacy of the Lakers.

As the series unfolded, something remarkable happened. The Pistons, led by their unity and selfless teamwork, began to chip away at the Lakers' aura of invincibility. *Game after game, they fought tenaciously, leaving no room for ego or complacency. In the end, the Pistons stunned the basketball world by defeating the Lakers in a series that was supposed to be a cakewalk for the favorites. How did they do it? On paper, the Lakers should've swept that series. But internal problems and distractions such as Kobe Bryant's rape trial, the constant reports of friction between Kobe and Shaq, the lame duck year of the once great coach, Phil Jackson—led to their defeat at the hands of a "lesser" team.*

Transition: Today, we are coming to a text where the favored team (Israel), who was supposed to have God in their corner, is swiftly routed, suffering a devastating defeat at the hands of a lesser power, the Philistines, who should've lost that contest. We're going to look at this story to see where Israel went wrong and to help us see where we often lose the battle before the fight ever begins.

Main thought: *A temporary defeat often masks deeper problems and reveals needed corrections.* Beneath a momentary setback can be more profound issues that need to be addressed in the life of the church.

Our story today reveals four missteps and a final consequence. We'll talk about, (1) the wrong enemy, (2) the wrong source, (3) the wrong solution, (4) the wrong response; and the final consequence—the glory of the Lord recedes from Shiloh.

1. (Wrong Enemy) Israel has bigger problems than the Philistines (1 Samuel 4:1–2). *"Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle and camped at Ebenezer while the Philistines camped at Aphek. ²The Philistines lined up in battle formation against Israel, and as the battle intensified, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who struck down about four thousand men on the battlefield."* **Background:** The Israelites camped at a place called **הַעֲבֹת הַיָּר** (*eben etzer*) meaning **"strong rock"** or "a mighty stone altar." During this era, the Philistines, rather than the Canaanites, emerged as the primary threat to Israel. They are **referenced approximately 150 times in 1 and 2 Samuel**. They typically a coastal people but have now become entrenched in Canaan's foothills, leading to the land itself being called **"Palestine" the Roman word for "Philistine."** *And make no mistake about it—they are a scourge on the land. Idolaters to the filthy, cruel god Dagon. They were marauders,*

pillaging towns and cities and causing destruction wherever they went.

But sometimes the issue before you is not the real issue. Sometimes the apparent problem is not the real problem.

Illustration: In 1986 the story that dominated the news cycle was the sudden and catastrophic explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the former Soviet Union. The problem was that operators initially thought they were running a routine safety test to see how the reactors would behave during a power outage but were unaware that the test performed could have brought the reactor into an explosive condition.

The reactor exploded due to a combination of design flaws, cheap materials, inadequate training, and a culture of secrecy within the Soviet nuclear industry. **The Chernobyl disaster serves as a stark reminder of how failing to correctly identify the underlying problem can lead to catastrophic outcomes.**

We might be surprised to discover just how often we misdiagnose our challenges.

- We think we have an income problem, and we really have a spending issue or, worse, a deeper false belief about money.
- Or we may discover that the root causes of our chronic illness are a poor diet, sedentary living, or gut health (who knew that having good gut flora could cure my eczema).
- We think our kids might be lazy and unmotivated or just hyper and distractable when in reality, they might have an underlying learning disability that is holding them back, such as ADHD, dyslexia, or Asperger's.
- We think we have relationship challenges when in reality, the issue is that we lack the temperament and humility to live in peaceful relationships with others.

If you've ever suddenly discovered that your problem wasn't really the problem—the issue potentiating before you wasn't the deeper root cause, then you know what Israel is experiencing right now.

(Application): And, of course, **When we work from false assumptions, we will make wrong decisions.** Israel is misdiagnosing their contest and its outcome with the Philistines. They don't have a Philistine problem; they've got a God problem. And if you have a God problem, then you and I don't have a more pressing, urgent matter to attend to.

So what decisions did they make? How did they choose poorly?

2. (Wrong Source) Israel listened to the wrong voice. The people are immediately guilty of misdirected devotion (1 Samuel 4:3)

“When the troops returned to the camp, the elders of Israel asked, ‘Why did the Lord defeat us today before the Philistines? Let's bring the ark of the Lord's covenant from Shiloh. Then it will go with us and save us from our enemies.’” Look again at verse 1, the very first sentence, **4:1 “And Samuel's words came to all Israel.”** So let me get this straight—they have (as we read at the top of the message) a spiritual and national renewal movement going on through Samuel. They have a man who can and does hear from God—he is God's spokesman, and everybody knows it.

And instead of asking *him* what God wanted them to do, they asked *themselves*, “Why did God defeat us? What did we do wrong?”

Illustration: In John 16 Jesus discusses his imminent departure, which will allow him to send the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, to them. God’s Spirit within them will be even more advantageous. Look at the disciples’ response. **John 16:17–19** “Then some of his disciples said to one another, “What is this he’s telling us: ‘In a little while, you will not see me; again in a little while, you will see me,’ and, ‘Because I am going to the Father’?”¹⁸ They said, “What is this he is saying, ‘In a little while’? We don’t know what he’s talking about.”¹⁹ Jesus knew they wanted to ask him, and so he said to them, “**Are you asking one another about what I said**, ‘In a little while, you will not see me; again, in a little while, you will see me’?” When Jesus asks, “Are you asking each other what I meant when I said I’m going away.” In other words, I’m right here! You can get it straight from me.

God has ordained pastors, teachers, and fellow believers in the community to help you work through some things in Scripture. As helpful and necessary as all that might be, it is never a replacement for going straight to the Word—to the source and hearing directly from Jesus in Scripture. **There are pressing issues of the heart that the pastor has no sermon for, and your Sunday School teacher has no lesson for.** Ultimately, nothing can take the place of engaging the text for ourselves.

Israel just became misguided in their pursuit—they could’ve gone straight to Samuel—God’s spokesman, and asked him why they lost. **Instead, they looked within; they listened to their feelings and followed their heart.** And they got trounced. And if you listen to that advice daily disseminated on social media, you also will live in defeat. Abandoning any external authority— an objective authority, for our own internal subject feelings and instincts can be catastrophic.

The heart is deceitful above all things. Sometimes, our intuition, our best instincts or beliefs may lead us astray. (Application): Don’t follow your heart; follow God’s heart. What does God want in this situation? What would the LORD have me do? Who would the LORD want me to marry? How would the LORD want me to give and serve?

But what specific “shape” did their misguided devotion bring?

3. (Wrong Solution) Israel sought a religious solution to a spiritual problem (1 Sam 4:3–4). “So, the people sent men to Shiloh to bring back the ark of the covenant of the Lord of Armies, who is enthroned between the cherubim. Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.” Now, let me say “religion” isn’t inherently bad. We practice the Christian religion. **Religion is the material form and shape that faith takes in the context of community.** The problem is not religion it’s empty, misguided religion.

In response to a perceived tactical blunder, they looked for a religious solution, not realizing that their real challenge was blasphemous, lazy, immoral, and arrogant leadership in Eli’s family.

The battlefield in the hill country of Israel was not the sole arena or theater of war in which they fought. **Caveat: Let me say a positive word about natural remedies.** Improving your physical well-being through diet and exercise can positively impact your mood, depression, self-esteem, and fatigue levels. If you've got a natural problem that can be fixed through God's natural world—solutions he's already abundantly supplied—you should not seek a spiritual answer for that. **But, for a problem of a spiritual nature, you need a spiritual solution.**

Illustration: Remember what Jesus told Pilate, "My Kingdom isn't of this world. If my Kingdom was of this world, my followers would fight. But as it is, my Kingdom is not from this world." It is a Kingdom that transforms human lives from the inside out. **This Kingdom does not have geographical borders, physical armaments or weaponry, a military hierarchy, does not have elected political officials, and there's no central headquarters like Rome, Constantinople, the Bible Belt, or even Jerusalem. This Kingdom breaks through every border and infiltrates every community and nation because it is a spiritual kingdom. Wherever the church is there, the Kingdom has become manifest.**

Our spiritual battle is a daily contest for dominance within. Will Jesus reign, or will I? Who is Lord of this life? We face daily those entrenched, inward temptations to judge others, to choose selfishly, to act unwisely, to walk in darkness—we are tempted with all that because that's already in us.

Illustration: Listen, if you've ever had the misfortune of baking a chocolate cake and accidentally using salt rather than sugar...when you bite into that cake—I don't care how delicious it looks—1 second after you bite it you will spit it out of your mouth. **And you can't tear through the cake trying to extract and remove every grain of salt. Nope, that salt is baked in the cake.** That salt is in every bite. We are tempted to sin because our nature has been corrupted—and you can't compartmentalize that.

(Application): A devout exterior can mask the disarray of an unhealthy inner life. You may have all your religious stuff together—you look like a delicious, scrumptious, chocolate pharisee. But your inner life is in shambles. The Israelites and their leaders think they have a tactical problem and so they throw more empty religion at it. Now, if you have the **wrong problem** (you think the Philistines are it when in fact, God is your problem) and have sought the **wrong source** (you're listening to yourself rather than God) and are applying liberal and copious amounts of the **wrong solution** (throwing more religion at it rather than dealing with the spiritual rot within) this will inevitably lead us to the...

4. (Wrong Expression) Israel's response of celebration (and confidence) did not match the moment (1 Sam 4:5–9). God's people mistakenly think that the situation calls for a festive celebration when what is really called for is deep and purifying reform.

⁵"When the ark of the covenant of the Lord entered the camp, all the Israelites raised such a loud shout that the ground shook. ⁶The Philistines heard the sound of the war cry and asked, 'What's this loud shout in the Hebrews' camp?' When the Philistines discovered that the ark of the Lord had entered the camp, ⁷they panicked. 'A god has entered their camp!' they said. 'Woe to us! Nothing like this has happened before. ⁸Woe to us! Who will rescue us from these magnificent gods? These are the gods that

slaughtered the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness.⁹ Show some courage and be men, Philistines! Otherwise, you'll serve the Hebrews just as they served you. Now be men and fight!" The people were so animated by the sight of the ark (*the artifact*) going ahead of them that their rowdy shouts scared the Philistines witless. They have psyched out their opponents, which is always what you hope to do before entering combat or competition. You want to beat them mentally before they get to the arena. But, they still lose the battle:

1 Sam 10–11 "So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and each man fled to his tent. The slaughter was severe—thirty thousand of the Israelite foot soldiers fell.¹¹ The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died." Certainly not the outcome we would have expected.

Illustration: God has called us to be a joyful, celebrating people. I spent my teens and twenties as a charismatic and Pentecostal. I can tell you, as a former Pentecostal, that in our worship, we had one speed: hopping; we had one mode: celebration; and one noise level: loud! When I first came to CCC, we had a Good Friday service, and I had the staff plan celebratory music and a big blow-out dinner. It was fun, the fellowship was enjoyable, the music was stimulating, the atmosphere was warm, friendly, and light—but in the coming days, I had several of our Lutheran and Presbyterian brothers and sisters say, "Where was the seriousness that the cross requires? Why didn't we spend any time contemplating our sins and the magnitude of what Christ has done for us at the cross?" I suddenly realized that in more ways than I thought, I kind of still think like a charismatic. I typically do like celebratory, festive praise and worship.

I came to realize through my Lutheran and Presby friends that there is a time and a season for everything under heaven. And there are times when the situation (baptisms) doesn't call for raucous praise—instead, we are called to sober thinking, solemn reflection, and seriousness as we contemplate the gravity of our sins and the magnitude of his grace on the cross. **Why doesn't this outward show of enthusiasm work for Israel here?** Because it doesn't match this moment. It is out of place. What is called for instead, is national repentance and leadership reform, not in the garments of praise, but in sackcloth and ashes. **(Application): We must never mistake the artifact (the symbol) for the actual presence of God.** Israel thought, "The ark is here, so God is here!" And hollering ensued. But no presence. No approval of what they were doing. In fact, severe judgment hovers ominously over this whole account. Never mistake the symbol for the reality. Never confuse the accouterments of our worship with God's actual presence or his approval.

5. Israel loses their defining characteristic as the glorious presence of God departs dead religion. Phineas' wife gives birth to "Ichabod."

1 Sam 4:19–22 Eli's daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant and about to give birth. **When she heard the news about the capture of God's ark** and the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband, she collapsed and gave birth because her labor pains came on her.²⁰ As she was dying, the women taking care of her said, "Don't be afraid. You've given birth to a son!" But she

did not respond or pay attention. ²¹ She named the boy Ichabod, saying, “The glory has departed from Israel,” referring to the capture of the ark of God and to the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband. ²² “The glory has departed from Israel,” she said, “because the ark of God has been captured.”

Now, notice in the story that two different people die as a response to the ark of the covenant being captured and hauled off to Philistia. Verse 18 says when Eli heard of the ark he fell over and broke his neck. And Phineas’ wife, Eli’s daughter-in-law who collapsed at the news that God’s ark had been taken, and as she lay dying and giving birth, **she forever trademarked her son with a horrible name—Ichabod—the glory of the Lord has departed.** The boy would be a living reminder of their defeat and God’s purging of Israel’s leadership.

Why was the loss of the ark such a big deal? The ark was the symbol of their defining characteristic. They are the people whom God’s presence dwells or tabernacles.

- **It represented God’s revelation (it contained the tablets of Moses).**
- **It symbolized God’s reconciliation** (it was the *kapparet* or place where atonement for sins was symbolically portrayed).
- **It signified God’s rule** (it was the “mercy seat” which is a seat of authority.) From the Holy of Holies by the Ark of the covenant—that’s where God runs his realm. It’s his command center. If this was Star Trek, the Holy of Holies as an inner sanctum is the bridge. And the golden lid of the ark is the chair, the seat from which God commands his armies. It’s the command center of Israel. That’s why Paul says, “But as for me, I will never boast about anything except the cross of our LORD Jesus Christ.”

Today in the same way, the cross reminds us of:

- **The depravity of our sin**—the depths to which we have fallen from grace. We took the best of us—the purest, most righteous, compassionate and truth-telling human being who ever lived—God’s incarnate Son—and we brutally killed him on that tree.
- **The gravity of our sin and the severity of our God**, who justly judges and condemns sin. The cross reminds us that the bill for a life of rebellion is coming due. And that the condemnation for sin was borne by a spotless lamb who was led to the shearers and did not open his mouth.
- **Of the enormity—the magnitude of God’s grace to us**—the lengths to which God was willing to go to discharge our debt, to cleanse us from our unrighteousness, and to renew and restore us to sonship.

As Paul told the Corinthians, "When I was with you, I knew only the message of the cross."

Eli and Phineas' wife died upon hearing the ark was taken because it symbolized their identity as the people God revealed Himself to in Moses' books, those whom God provided temporary atonement for, and those under His lordship. The church's defining

characteristic is Jesus' presence among us, with the cross as its symbol. Remove the cross, and it ceases to be a church.

When a church forsakes God's truth and the gospel for well-intentioned pursuits, it risks becoming Ichabod, losing God's glory and purpose.

[So, how do you define yourself today?](#) By your *various roles*, or *achievements*, or *hobbies*, or even *relationships*? Maybe you can't imagine not being the father or mother of these children. Maybe you can't fathom life without your job? Eventually, life strips those things away from us, and what will be left? Let our identity rest solely in what Christ has done for us.

Conclusion: Maybe some are here today, and you've realized that all along you've had the wrong problem—you have thought that your problem was something on the surface, a spouse, boredom, or a new job, or more fastidious religion.

And so, you've bought into all the wrong solutions. You tried it all—divorce, more intense leisure, a better opportunity, or greater religious devotion.

And this has led to an ultimately empty religious expression of worship—which has turned out to be false worship. And now this false worship of a false God has all given birth to an Ichabod—a life without God's glory in the face of Christ.

It's time to come home. It's time to repent of your sins, embrace the crucified Lord, and walk in the newness of resurrection life as you are changed from image to image, glory to glory on to resurrection day.