

Eastwood Baptist (AM, 22/7/'18) **“COMMIT YOURSELVES TO THE LORD”** (1 Sam 4:1-7:17)

**Introduction** Symbolic objects abound when people want to be made to think of God, including within Christianity. Most prominent among Christians is the Cross, although this symbol takes a variety of forms and is understood in a variety of ways. Symbolic objects were important in the Old Testament era, and in today's passage the Ark of the Covenant is very important indeed. The people of Israel normally regarded the Ark of the Covenant with great reverence and believed that God made himself present there in some special way. But, as we'll see in this morning's passage, they were not altogether clear in their thinking about the function of the Ark and the nature of God's presence.

**The Ark: Not a Magic Talisman** (4:1-11) This morning's passage begins with the Israelites going out to fight against the Philistines, and being heavily defeated, with the loss of about four thousand men. So the leaders of Israel meet together, and ask one another, "Why did the LORD bring defeat on us today?" They decide that what they need to do is to go and fetch the Ark of the Covenant from Shiloh, and take it into battle. Their reasoning seems to be that the presence of the Ark guarantees the presence and favour of God, and this in turn guarantees victory. So men go to Shiloh and fetch the Ark. When the Ark comes into their camp, the Israelites shout loudly in excitement. They shout loudly enough to be heard by the Philistines, who are afraid when they hear the reason. "A god has come into their camp," they say. "We're in trouble! Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods, who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues?" The Philistines seem to have a similar idea about the Ark to that of the Israelites, which gives us reason to think that there may be something wrong with Israel's theology. Despite their fear, the Philistines go into battle, and the hopes of the Israelites are shattered. The Ark is captured by the Philistines, and Hophni and Phinehas are killed. The Israelites are proved wrong. The mere presence of the Ark is not a guarantee of victory.

**The Ark's Capture: The Cause of Deep Grief** (4:12-22) A messenger runs from the battle ground with the terrible news, and the reactions to the news of the capture of the Ark are striking. First, there is the messenger himself. He enters Shiloh with his clothes torn and dust on his head. We are not told which part of his bad news has distressed him most, but it is different with Eli and Eli's daughter-in-law. Eli hears first of Israel's heavy defeat, then of the death of both his sons, and finally of the capture of the Ark. It is not when Eli hears of defeat that he reacts visibly. It is not even when he hears of the death of his sons. It is when Eli hears of the capture of the Ark that he falls backwards off his chair, and his neck is broken, and he dies. Something similar occurs when the pregnant wife of Phinehas hears the news. She reacts to three terrible things together: the

death of her husband, the death of her father-in-law, and the loss of the Ark. But it is the loss of the Ark which seems to trouble her the most. She goes into premature labour, and eventually dies. Before she dies, the women attending her try to comfort her by telling her that she has given birth to a son. But she isn't comforted. She names the son Ichabod (meaning "no glory"), and her last words are: "The Glory has departed from Israel, for the Ark of God has been captured!" It is clear that the capture of the Ark is seen as a great catastrophe. It is less clear why this is so, but it seems likely that it is seen as taking God's presence away from Israel, and possibly as placing God within the power of the Philistines. If so, they are wrong, just as they were wrong before when they thought that the presence of the Ark would guarantee victory.

**The Ark in Captivity: God's Power Undiminished** (5:1-12) It may look as though God has been defeated, especially when the Philistines take the Ark of God and bring it into the temple of their God Dagon. But this is not the case. **Read 5:3-4.** Symbolically, Dagon has been defeated by Yahweh, the LORD. And this is not all. **Read 5:6-7.** The Philistines of Ashdod should not be seen as having a fully accurate understanding of Israel's God, but they are right in thinking that he is more powerful than their god Dagon. So what are the Philistines of Ashdod to do? They persuade their fellow Philistines in Gath to receive the Ark. Perhaps the people of Gath thought that the God of Israel was not really behind the outbreak of illness in Ashdod. Or perhaps they thought that they were better people, and would be protected by their gods. Whatever they thought, they soon had the same experience as the people of Ashdod, and sent the Ark on to Ekron. But the Ekronites would have none of it, so now the leaders of the Philistines decided that the only solution was to send the Ark of the God of Israel back to Israel. They had learnt that possessing the Ark did not give them power over the God of Israel.

**The Return of the Ark: A Dangerous Glory** (6:1-7:2a) In Chapter 6 we see the Ark come back to Israel. If there was great mourning when the Ark was captured, and the people of Israel had no expectation of what would happen in Philistia, now there is rejoicing in Beth Shemesh, and no expectation of what is going to happen there. It seems that their rejoicing is not accompanied by reverence toward the Ark and what it represents, as some of the Israelites of Beth Shemesh are so presumptuous as to open the Ark and look inside. **Read 6:19-20.** This brings us up to our Bible reading earlier this morning. The Ark ends up in Kireath Jearim, and the narrative seems to imply that this time it is treated with respect, and all is well. What are we to make of this story of the Ark as people of the New Covenant? We have no equivalent of the Ark of the Covenant, nor do we need any. But I would like to suggest a possible inference. The Israelites were wrong when they placed a superstitious confidence in the mere physical presence of the Ark. But they were also wrong when they treated it lightly. So where God has given us visible expressions of his

presence with us, we need to avoid both these mistakes. God has given us the Bible, so we should neither treat it like a lucky charm nor treat it with disdain. It is worth nothing to have a Bible on display in our homes, or many Bibles on our bookshelves, if we never read it. It is worth little to read it if we don't think about what we read. But if we read it and interpret it so as to suit ourselves, if we fail to respect what God says to us through the Bible, then we are as presumptuous as the people of Beth Shemesh.

**True Respect for the Ark: Repentance and Commitment (7:2b-17)**

The people of Israel now turn back to God, so Samuel tells them what it means to turn back to God. He tells them first that they must turn back to God with their whole hearts, turning away from all false gods. This last section of this morning's passage is not hard to apply. God wants his New Covenant people to live as people of the New Covenant. He wants us not just to say that Jesus is Lord but to live under Jesus' Lordship. And when we go astray God wants us to confess our sin and seek his forgiveness.