

Careless Presumptions

I Samuel 4:1b-11

A woman was sitting in the waiting room for her first appointment with a new dentist. She noticed his diploma, which bore the same name of a tall, handsome, dark-haired boy that she had had a crush on back in high school. "Could this be the same guy," she wondered.

She discarded any such notion when a balding, paunchy gray-haired man appeared. "He's way too old to have been in my class, she thought to herself. Still, after he examined her teeth, she asked, "Did you attend Springfield High?"

"Yes! I'm a Mustang," he gleamed with pride.

"When did you graduate?" she asked.

"1975," he replied. "Why do you ask?"

"You were in my class!" she exclaimed.

"Really?" he said, looking her over closely. "What did you teach?"

Presumptuousness has a way of backfiring on us as our Bible text will demonstrate. When *JEHOVAH* brought His people out of Egypt, He told them how to live in the land that He would give them. He would bless their obedience and punish their rebellion. It was that simple:

³~ If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, ⁴I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit. ⁵Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land.

⁶~ I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid. I will remove savage beasts from the land, and the sword will not pass through your country. ⁷You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall by the sword before you. - Leviticus 26:3-7

Of course, the penalties for rebellion were similarly clear:

... ²⁷~ If in spite of this you still do not listen to me but continue to be hostile toward me, ²⁸then in my anger I will be hostile toward you, and I myself will punish you for your sins seven times over." - Leviticus 26:27, 28

Before any king reigned in Israel, and before the spiritual renewal led by the prophet Samuel, Eli was the nation's high priest. It was the end of that era of the judges when God had raised up leaders, on occasion, to rescue His people from their enemies. Nevertheless, the nation had steadily abandoned covenant faithfulness to *JEHOVAH*. As a result, the Philistines reaped havoc in Israel, for God was not willing to protect the nation apart from covenant obedience. The obvious remedy should have been to return to God and honor the covenant. Instead, Israel's leaders came up with a superstitious, pseudo-spiritual, quick-fix substitute for the heart repentance that was needed.

Instead of returning to God in contrition, the Israelites came up with a plan to bring God to them, but their plan did not take into account how they had defaulted on the terms of the covenant. Without examining their hearts one bit, the people decided to pull out a certain religious artifact that had always been present back in the old days when God had shown Himself to be with them. They would display the Ark of the Covenant before their enemies as evidence that God was with them, but their plan was presumptuous, because they gave no thought to repenting or changing the way they were living. God desired covenant loyalty. They trusted outward religion.

How were they presumptuous? They expected God to honor a solution He had not given them.

I. Man's Explanation Is Not Divine Fact (1b-4)

Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek. ²The Philistines deployed their forces to meet Israel, and as the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand of them on the battlefield. ³When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, "Why did the LORD bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines? 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."

⁴So the people sent men to Shiloh, and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim. And Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

A. Israel Needed to Explain a Body Count of 4000

Back when Israel first occupied the Land of Promise, they cut through their enemies like a knife through hot butter. So, when they were faced with explaining this current defeat, it seemed obvious to ask, "What was different then from now?" One difference that jumped out was the Ark of the Covenant. Back in the old days, the Tabernacle was broken down and moved from place to place as the people moved from place to place. The most sacred Tabernacle furnishing was the Ark. Whenever the people were on the move, the Ark was displayed prominently in the procession, and it was present whenever they fought their battles.

The Ark was built to store the tablets of the law that were given to Moses. It was completely covered with gold. It was placed in the Most Holy Place, a chamber in the Tabernacle accessible only to the High Priest and only once a year. Two cherubim angels, with wings extended were at each end of the lid to the Ark. The space beneath these wings served as God's throne when He descended into the High Priest's presence once a year, on the Day of Atonement.

One rocket scientist among them concluded, "It's so obvious! How did I not think of it sooner? How can God fight for us if we don't carry His throne into battle with us?" So, they decided that the thing to do was to go to Shiloh, yank that Ark out of the Tabernacle and display it the next time they engaged the Philistines. What these "*Raiders of the Lost Ark*" failed to realize was that no mere wooden box, no matter how fancy it was, could insure God's presence. *JEHOVAH's* presence and His promise to fight for them were based on their loyalty to the covenant, of which that box was just a symbol. This nation had entered into an agreement with *JEHOVAH* to be loyal to Him, and they had defaulted. They had no basis to expect Him to defend them.

To make this extravaganza even more ridiculous, Israel paraded out the sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas. These boys were priests, but only because priesthood was a matter of bloodline. Actually, these "priests" were two of the rottenest sinners in Israel. They caused many people to despise even going to the temple. As priests, Hophni and Phinehas were entitled to a share of the meat sacrificed in the temple, but they forcefully took more than their share. Sometimes, they took raw meat, before the fat had even been burned. In other words, they took theirs before God got His. They slept with the women who served at the Tabernacle. The people had strayed so far from *JEHOVAH* that they were willing to showcase these two clowns in spite of their blatant disregard for holiness. The people had no basis themselves for appreciating God's holiness, so why *WOULD* they recognize that Hophni and Phinehas were not even good men, much less godly men?

Israel had just posted a body count of 4000. They were right to realize that they needed God, but they were wrong to think that fetching the Ark from Shiloh would secure His presence. God's glory left them when they left God. Without Him, the Ark was just a really heavy box.

B. God's People Must Always Acknowledge the Invisible behind the Visible

Every church has its rituals. What is important is to know the meanings behind the rituals. A young boy attended a very formal church service for the first time. There was to be a service of Holy Communion, followed by the sermon. As the minister stood at the communion table, and broke the bread, the boy whispered, "What does that mean, Dad?" His father said, "That's how Jesus told us to remember Him." The minister lifted the chalice. The boy asked, "What does that mean?" "That reminds us how Jesus shed his blood for us." Finally, the minister moved to the pulpit. He took off his watch with a flourish, and put it down in front of him. The boy asked, "And what does that mean, Dad?" His father said, "That, my son, means absolutely nothing."

For some people, less superstition surrounds a typical haunted house than surrounds a church building. Occasionally, I receive a call from people looking to use our building for a wedding. They are unchurched and apparently uninterested. I ask, "Why?" To the world, marriage is a civil contract that is just as valid if presided over by a preacher in a church or a judge on a trampoline. They often share that a church wedding gives them a sense of God's presence and a feeling that the marriage will be blessed by God. God never promised to bless anyone who superstitiously attaches Him to a place. He blesses those who are in covenant with Him.

The bread and the wine of Communion and the water of Baptism are windows through which man makes contact with the divine. But, without authentic communion with Jesus, the emblems of our Communion service are meaningless. Without faith and a repentant heart that is turning to Jesus, and without the invisible, regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, water Baptism is just odd.

Symbols are important. If there were no value in symbols, Jesus would never have commanded Baptism as the faith response of a sinner to Himself. If symbols were irrelevant, He would never have instituted the Lord's Supper as a memorial of what He did for us. Church design, art and handcrafted crosses can be useful to the extent that they assist us in drawing near or reflecting upon invisible truths. But, apart from the spiritual realities, they are meaningless. In fact, they are something a bit more dangerous than meaningless. They can become icons and idols. Any emotional response to them must never be confused with spiritual worship or true reverence.

In our lives at home, and together in our churches, I suppose that people will always be prone to believe human explanations for what is needed. "If we just do this, or try this or implement that ... that's what we need!" But, what we so often need is as simple as a greater humility and a greater repentance that essentially invites the power of God to showcase itself.

II. Man's Excitement Is Not Divine Faith (5-8)

⁵When the ark of the LORD's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. ⁶Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, "What's all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?"

When they learned that the ark of the LORD had come into the camp, ⁷the Philistines were afraid. "A god has come into the camp," they said. "We're in trouble! Nothing like this has happened before. ⁸Woe 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.

A. Israelite and Philistine Alike Were Caught Up in the Superstition

When the Israelites saw the Ark, their shouts shook the ground. Enthusiastic faith is powerful, but ultimately, if there is no revealed basis for faith, then it's an empty enthusiasm, and any celebration may just be so much noise. Anyone who wandered by Israel's camp that day might have been impressed at the excitement. They may have reported to others, "There's something exciting going on. It was a great service; cheerful, joyous, hopping. I always thought religious people were dull, but there's nothing dull about what's happening in the camp of Israel."

A bystander might conclude that any group with that much enthusiasm must be a community of great faith, but they didn't have a lick of true faith. They had come up with a hair-brained scheme not at all rooted in truth, a mindless fix to a hard situation. Their scheme did not recognize their profound need for repentance. What a miscalculation this would turn out to be.

It is worth noting that Israel was no less superstitious in this matter than were the Philistines. The Philistines were also familiar with how Israel's God had rescued His people from Egypt. They too remembered those stories of how Israel occupied the land because their God fought for them. When they saw that Ark in Israel's camp, they believed they were in serious trouble. Of course, the Philistines were vile pagans, and their religion was utter superstition. Somehow, their terror of an ornamental box seems more excusable than Israel's putting its faith in one.

B. God's People Must Always Engage Him from the Heart

Whatever was going on in Israel's camp sounded like an authentic expression of worship to *JEHOVAH*, but what was really occurring was an enthusiastic celebration of the people's own dumb idea. Have you ever given a gift that you were really excited about to someone only to detect that you were more impressed with it than he or she was. You gave them something you liked, but you did not work very hard to know what they might like. "The wife has been hinting about remodeling the downstairs for some time. You'd think she'd appreciate that table saw."

Israel was much more impressed with this celebration than God was. It causes me to wonder if many times Christian worship, especially in view of all the arguments that revolve around it, is not more a matter of people giving God something they like, expecting that He will simply like it too. I'm not suggesting that God is more or less pleased with this or that kind of song or this or that style of expression. I do know that we engage or fail to engage God because of our hearts.

When you are worshipping God, by all means, shout and sing if you're happy. People express themselves in worship in many ways, and none of us should sit in judgment over the expression of another. But, having said that, do not be so foolish as to think that mere enthusiasm proves the presence of authenticity any more than quietness does. True faith in God may express itself with leaping and shouting, but a faith just as happy may sit perfectly still in His presence.

There is no greater blunder than to confuse enthusiasm with worship. How is your heart? Have you repented of the sins you have been guarding and validating? Are you at peace with your brother or sister in Christ? Have you quieted your soul and left the concerns and demands of this world at the door? Have you emptied yourself of pride and humbly cried out to God that you need Him? Until you do, no external place, no external form, no external style can secure the kind of worship that our God demands of us. The heart of worship is the heart of the man.

III. Man's Execution Is Not Divine Force (9-11)

⁹Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!"

¹⁰So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. ¹¹The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

A. The Israelites Placed Too Much Confidence in Their Own Scheme

The Philistines believed that because a fancy box had been brought into the Hebrew camp, a god was present to fight for Israel: "We're in trouble! Nothing like this has happened before." But, because the Philistines were a silly and superstitious people, they also trusted their own gods. Rather than run from the fray, they encouraged one another to fight all the harder. So, while they were all revved-up to fight for their very survival, what was Israel up to? They were falsely confident in a stupid plan. They may have even approached the actual combat too casually.

Israel came up with a simplistic, human explanation for why they could not stand up against their enemies. They got excited about their silly explanation and subsequent plan. They executed their plan presumptuously. This scheme that the Israelites concocted after losing 4000 men resulted in a loss of 30,000 more men, as well as Hophni and Phinehas. Israel tried to use God like some sort of a mop to clean up a mess they had made. They did not turn to Him with their hearts, and it did not serve them well. It never does. God requires repentant hearts.

B. God's People Must Always Trust the Infallible Word of God

We still tend to put great hope in hair-brained schemes. Novelty is intoxicating. Others admire our creativity. Innovation is good. But, it's all rather useless if the great need of the hour is for God's people to turn to Him in repentance and faith. The Hebrews were right about their need for God in the camp, but they were wrong in thinking that they could program His presence just by putting some specific fixture in place - just as we are wrong when we convince ourselves that God's presence and blessing can be secured by just the right program or a new worship style. God can bless anything we might bring to the table for serving Him. He might even want to. But, what He wants more than anything is for His people to honor the covenant from their hearts.

The old covenant said, "Obey me, and I will bless you." The new one says, "You are blessed. I have redeemed you by the blood of Jesus. Become like Him. Be holy as I am holy."

The great irony in this story is that God would have been there. He would have fought for them, but they were too blind and sinful to call on Him. God comes to His people whenever His truth is proclaimed, heard, embraced and obeyed. He comes wherever hearts are repentant and wherever His children realize how desperately they need Him. He comes to those committed to unity in His church, to tending to the needs of His little ones and to being careful to live holy lives. There are many gimmicks to which men resort to convince themselves that God is present. But none of them are the real stuff. God comes wherever hearts that are ready to obey invite Him.