

Chapter 4 Capture of the Ark. “Why has the Lord defeated us to day before the Philistines?” Four thousand Israelites were killed in the first battle with the Philistines. When our hearts are hardened through complacency and disobedience, it takes deep humbling to open our hearts again to hear His voice (Jud. 20:20-28, Is. 30:18). It can involve considerable time, depending on the degree of desperation—from a few days or less to a few or many years (Ahab, 1 Ki. 21:27-29; Hezekiah, 2 Ki. 19:14-20; 20:1-5; Isaiah, Is. 6; Esther, Est. 4:16; Daniel, Dan. 9-10; Jacob’s sons, Gen. 42-44; Israel, Ex. 1:12-14; Jud. 6; 10:8; 13:1; 20:18-28, etc.).

This explains why most people would rather follow worthless idols than the true God, with all His endless blessings. It’s simply too much trouble to find Him in the *real world* where He “hides” Himself (Is. 45:15, Pr. 25:2). Pride and complacency are like masks, hiding us from God and ourselves; our perception of Him and one another is superficial (1 Jn. 4:6-8). The day will come when “I shall know just as I also am known” (1 Cor. 13:12), but we should be progressing toward that Day even now, as men and women of faith did in times past (Heb. 11). “For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven . . .” (2 Cor. 5:2-3, see also Php. 3:10-11).

Because of the *heart-rending* (Heb. 4:12-13) and usually lengthy process involving darkness, affliction, humbling, commitment, and perseverance, even believers tend strongly to take shortcuts (Is. 30:15-26) to our own shame and sorrow (Is. 50:10-11). Notice in Exodus 20 that the people “could not endure what was commanded,” telling Moses to hear God and then tell them what He said. “So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the *thick darkness* where God was” (Ex 20:21, Heb. 12:20).

So it’s no wonder the people in Eli’s time, when “there was no widespread revelation” (1 Sam. 3:1), resorted to using the Ark the way the heathen use idols or the way we use God, for our “pleasures” (Jas. 4:3). God told Israel through Amos, “I hate, I despise your feast days . . . Though you offer Me burnt offerings I will not accept them . . . Take away from Me the noise of your songs . . . Woe to you who are at ease in Zion . . .” (Am. 5:21-6:1). “For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep [died prematurely].” (1 Cor. 11:29-30)

If taking the Lord’s supper without heart-correspondence brought “judgment” and even death, no wonder that when Israel brought the Ark with them against the Philistines, it brought judgment and death. Thirty thousand Israelites were slain, along with Eli’s two sons. Eli fell over and died when he heard the news that the Ark was captured by the Philistines. When one of his daughters-in-law heard it, she died in childbirth, naming her newborn son “Ichabod, saying ‘The glory has departed from Israel’” (4:21). She and Eli thought God’s glory left with the Ark, never realizing that, except for Samuel, it had long left through their half-heartedness toward God.

In Ezekiel God gives us a picture of the departure of His glory from the Temple through Judah’s disobedience (10:18-19). It is the same Ark seen in the heavenly realm, corresponding to the throne in Revelation 4 with its four “living creatures” who “do not rest day or night, saying: ‘holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come.’” In Revelation 6 these living creatures in some way oversee the dispensing of the terrible End-time judgments on the earth through the opening of the seals.

Chapters 5-6. Is it any wonder, then, that when the Philistines brought the Ark to Ashdod, judgment broke out against them, beginning with their god Dagon. In panic they moved the Ark to Gath, but “the hand of the Lord was against the city with a very great destruction.” When they moved it again to Ekron, “the Ekronites cried out, saying ‘They have brought the ark of the God of Israel to us, to kill us and our people.’” In desperation they gathered together and urged their leaders to “let it go back to its own place.” “For there was a deadly destruction throughout all the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. And the men who did not die were stricken with the tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.” (5:9-11) God heard!

Apparently the death and destruction achieved its objective on the Philistines, for in their desperation they sought to send it away with a “trespass offering” (“guilt offering,” NIV) in order to “give glory to the God of Israel” and thereby “lighten His hand” of judgment. “Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? When He did mighty things among them, did they not let the people go, that they might depart?” These statements came not from a prophet of God but from the *Philistine* “priests and diviners”! (6:2-6)

Two or three things are remarkable about this. First, that the events of the Exodus under Moses more than 400 years earlier had become so widely known in such significant detail as the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. And second, that these priests of demon gods understood through Pharaoh’s experience the danger of hardened hearts in respect to God’s judgments. Perhaps the *most* stunning reality is that Eli, God’s priest and judge of Israel, with all the truth at his disposal, including Israel’s history—its recurring cycles of disobedience and judgment—did not understand! One wonders whether he will “receive a stricter judgment” than the Philistine priests, except that they also “knew much” (Jas. 3:1, Lu. 12:47).

Several passages come to mind when I think of how God will judge the heathen. Combining Luke 12:47-48, Romans 2:12-16, John 9:41; 15:22,24, and 2 Peter 2:21, it’s obvious God will judge each one according to his

response to the knowledge he had. Add these passages—Romans 1:19-21 and Psalm 19:3—and it seems God has given us enough truth in nature to render us “without excuse” on Judgment Day, for even nature “declare[s] the glory of God” and “His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.”

Why then are “My people destroyed for *lack* of knowledge”? (Hos. 4:6) Because *in the face* of God’s attempts to reveal Himself, hardened hearts refuse to see and understand (Mt. 13:14). “The humble He guides in justice, and the humble He teaches His way . . . The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant” (Ps. 25:9,14). Furthermore God gives more to those who are faithful with what they already have (Mt. 25:29, Lu. 16:11). Notice it was when Paul heard of the *faith* and *love* of the saints in Ephesus and Colosse that he prayed they would receive wisdom, knowledge, and understanding (Eph. 1:15-18, Col. 1:9-11, see also Php. 1:9).

With this in mind, winning the lost is far more than communicating to them the knowledge of the Lord. It is enduring the lengthy and trying process of letting God “work in them both to will and to do” (Php. 2:12), the softening of hard hearts—usually through His patience and love *in us!!!* If *only* “spiritual warfare” were just “declaring” and “praying”! But no: “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they *did not love their lives to the death*” (Rev. 12:11, see also 2 Cor. 12:12).

Some might ask if we should leave the heathen alone, since giving them more knowledge makes them more accountable. In no way, for two reasons: First, those whose hearts will only harden further at the preaching of the Gospel must be brought to the place where their sin and rebellion is obvious to them and they are *clearly* “without excuse” in the face of God’s judgement (Is. 6:9-10, Rev. 15:3-4). And second, there are countless multitudes who long to know the truth, whose hearts are almost beyond broken; but God’s truths “declared” in nature have been twisted by demon gods into superstitions which bring torment and fear rather than life and freedom. They are “lost.” They “perish” without Christ! (Jn. 3:16, 2 Cor. 4:3-4).

Rather than give us understanding of how He judges the “innocent,” God has given us the responsibility to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk. 16:15). This “Great Commission” is so important that for the task, He has equipped us with weapons that will bring down these “rulers of the darkness of this age” through His Word and power—signs and wonders, gifts of the spirit, and revelation of who we are “in Christ” so that we go not in our strength and name but in His! (Col. 1:27-29, 2 Cor. 5:17-21, Eph. 6:12f)

But just as important as “rescuing the perishing” is the fact that two kingdoms are in conflict—two spheres of influence and control. Among the heathen are no doubt tens of thousands, if not millions, of potential giants in the faith, men and women who will tower above us spiritually, for “God has chosen . . . the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence” (1 Cor. 1:27-29). They await “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” to be “delivered . . . from the power of darkness and conveyed . . . into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (2 Cor. 4:6, Col. 1:13).

6:19-20 The cows pulling the cart with the Ark went 12 miles and stopped at Beth Shemesh one of the priestly cities in Judah. The men immediately offered the cows as burnt offerings and “made sacrifices the same day to the Lord.” “Then He struck the men of Beth Shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the Lord.” Many commentators feel the number 50,000 and 70 is “a copyist error,” since Beth Shemesh was only a village. If correct, one explanation is that 70 died in Beth Shemesh and a plague spread to the surrounding areas taking the lives of 50,000. And the men said, “Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God? And to whom shall it go up from us?”

From Israel to Philistia the “consuming fire” of God’s Presence brought judgment, and all the more when the men removal the lid of the Ark, the solid gold *mercy seat* with its two cherubim (arch-angels) facing one another but looking toward the mercy seat. This careless act removed the only thing that protected them from exposure to God’s holy law and its *consuming fire*. (Ex. 25:17-22, Heb. 9:4). “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. . . . So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” (Jas. 2:10-13)

This most difficult lesson of all, and the basis of divine authority especially in spiritual warfare, would be played out in the heart-rending travail of Israel’s first two kings, Saul and David, laying the foundation for the Kingdom which will “endure forever” (Ps. 89:20-29).

Points to consider:

1. Knowledge requires accountability, both before God and toward others. To what extent are we walking in faithfulness to the knowledge we have? In Matthew 25:14-46 Jesus spoke of this *stewardship* in terms of eternal judgment and is the basis by which the sheep will be separated from the goats.

2. It’s risky to attempt to worship and serve God when our hearts are not surrendered to Him. His holiness is a *consuming fire* to those who (a) walk in hypocrisy, and (b) those who fail to walk in mercy. God speaks to us “from above the mercy seat” (Ex. 25:22), not from Mt. Sinai (the law). *This is the theme and conclusion of Hebrews 12*, and in fact, the entire book of Hebrews, as it is of the whole Bible, with its grand climax in Revelation.