

## 1 Samuel 4 and 5 sermon : Part 1 – “Israel”

All Saints Anglican Church Waitara

[www.waitara.anglican.asn.au](http://www.waitara.anglican.asn.au)

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\* **III** – I used to have a pet rabbit. Smokey. He lived in a cage. I used to see go and visit him every day. But the novelty wore off. Time ran out. Life's busy for an 8 year old. I got bored of him. So I got one of those automatic water dispensers on the side of the cage and one of those automatic food dispensers as well. Every week, I would fill up the water and the food, move the cage to a different spot of the grass and that was it. I checked in on him every now and then. But only saw him about once a week.

**How often do we treat God like that?** Let's be honest. How often do we visit God when it suits us? Visit him in prayer. Visit him in his Word. Visit him in church. When we feel like it. When it's convenient. As we get to 1 Samuel, this is the way Israel have been treating God. Israel were visiting God every now and then – whenever they needed help, they would “visit” God, and he would come and help them. And then Israel would ignore God again.

In chapter 2 of 1 Samuel, we meet Eli the high priest, and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas. But, 1 Samuel 2:12 says:

\* *“Eli's sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the Lord.”*

Eli's sons were priests who would cheat with the offerings brought for sacrifice. They would sleep with the women who served at the tent of meeting. Even Israel's leaders were falling away. So God promises to Eli that he will wipe out his family line from the priesthood and will raise up a faithful priest. **Samuel** will be God's priest, God's judge, God's leader, over Israel.

So Samuel arrives on the scene, just as chapter 4 brings us to perhaps the lowest point ever for Israel. In chapter 4, the Philistines are closing in on Israel and there is a battle at Ebenezer. And Israel is defeated. 4,000 men are killed. It was a huge loss for Israel. And Israel asks themselves in verse 3:

\* *“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.”*

They ask: “Why didn't God help us win?” Was it because we've been ignoring him? Was it because our leadership is corrupt? Was it because we're worshipping other gods? NO! It must be because we don't have the magical ark of God in our camp! Bring in the magic box with God inside! Bring in the lucky charm! Bring in the magic Genie lamp and give it a rub! THEN we will win!

Another battle. They bring the ark into camp. The Philistines are afraid. Verse 7:

\* *“a god has come into the camp” they said. We're in trouble!”*

So the Philistines went into battle again, ... and defeated the Israelites, again, this time killing 30,000 men. That's about the population of Hornsby, Waitara and Wahroonga combined. They not only defeated them, they slaughtered them.

AND THEN, the lowest point: verse 11:

\* *“the ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.”*

When Eli hears the news, he falls down dead. When Phinehas' pregnant wife hears the news, she goes into labour and dies. But before she does, she names her child “Ichabod”, in verse 22, which means “no glory” because, she says,

\* *“the glory has departed from Israel for the ark of God has been captured.”*

\* **III** – Picture of ark

What was the ark of God, which makes this such a big event?

Well, first of all, the **ark** was about 1.1 meters long, and about 70 centimetres wide and high, made of acacia wood and overlaid with gold. [It's the object everyone runs after in the movie "Raiders of the lost ark".]

In the ark, Moses placed the 10 commandments – the law of God – these laws were the terms of the covenant between the Israelites and God. [See Exodus 25: 10-16 on handout]

But there was also the **cover** of the ark. The cover was more than just a lid. It was called the *atonement cover*. Leviticus 16 tells us about this. The Day of Atonement was the one day of the year where all the sins of Israel were atoned for, paid for. The high priest would prepare the sacrifice of a bull and a goat, and their blood was to be sprinkled on the atonement cover, to cover the sins of the people of Israel. The blood ran over the atonement cover and over the ark that held the laws of God, the laws which God's people had broken. [See Lev 16:11-16 (on handout)]

One more thing about the ark – on top of the ark, on top of the atonement cover was the *mercy seat of God*. Exodus 25:22 tells us how it was made:

*22 There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites."*

The mercy seat was where God "sat" and talked with Moses.

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- So ***in*** the ark we have the 10 commandments.
- On ***top*** of the ark we have the cover, where atonement for sins was made, AND
- On ***top*** of the ***cover***, we have the mercy seat, where God came down and sat.

Without this ark, God's presence, his glory, had departed from Israel. His law. His mercy. His presence. His glory. Gone.

Israel had been treating this ark like a magic Genie lamp. If they had the ark of God in their backyard, they had God in their pocket. But they were wrong. Israel did not ***control*** God by holding the ark.

And when the ark is captured, the Philistines soon learn that Israel's God cannot be controlled. In chapter 5 we hear about God's victory lap around the Philistine camps. First, God destroys their god Dagon, then he afflicts the Philistines in Ashdod with tumours. And as they move the ark to Gath and then to Ekron, God continues to afflict the people with tumours and death. Finally, the Philistines, in chapter 6, decide to return the ark to the Israelites.

You see, God is still powerful – over ***every*** nation and over ***every*** god.

God is mighty and sovereign and powerful and holy. He is to be feared above all gods! Not a God we can just visit occasionally, or a Genie lamp we rub when we need help. The Israelites failed to realise that God would **remove his presence from them** if they failed to turn their hearts to him.

Israel is learning a powerful lesson. If your hearts have left God, God's glory will leave you. If your hearts are cut off from God, then God's mercy is cut off from you. God will not be mocked. He will not put up with being treated like a lucky charm.

**III** – People so easily put their faith in lucky charms, or tarot cards, or horoscopes, or magic stones... The Bible calls these things idolatry and witchcraft. (Galatians 5:20) These things simply take our hearts and our trust away from God alone. Even with "religion", we can exchange our lucky stones with symbols or ceremonies and make *them* our idols. Crosses, special tables, or other special items or ceremonies or creeds. They can become the ***focus*** of our faith, instead of God himself. God is not in a box, or in an object, or in a ceremony. God is in our lives. And today, God is with us through Jesus. From Hebrews 9:11-12 –

*\* 11When **Christ** came as high priest ... 12He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his **own** blood, having obtained eternal redemption.*

Where is the ark of God today? Where is atonement found? Where is the Mercy Seat? It is **Jesus**:

- \* 1. **Jesus is the ark** – he fulfilled all of God’s laws.
- \* 2. **Jesus offers atonement** – he **is** the sacrifice. He shed his **own** blood for our sins. Not the blood of bulls and goats, but his **own** blood, once and for all.
- \* 3. And finally, **Jesus is the mercy seat**. He **is** the place where we meet God.

God offers us his presence through Jesus. God offers us atonement for our sins through Jesus. God offers us mercy through Jesus. But how do we treat Jesus? How do we treat his presence in our life? Is he **just** there when we need him? Do we **just** pray when we want something? Do we **just** praise him when we’re in the mood? Do we **just** call on him when we’re in trouble? Do we **just** treat him like a Genie in a bottle, like a pet in a cage?

Prayer, studying the Bible, coming to church – there’s plenty of excuses not to spend too much time on these things, aren’t there? The best one I think is “God’s not keeping count.” That’s right isn’t it? God’s not keeping count. He doesn’t tally up how often you go to church. He doesn’t tick your name off when you say your prayers or pick up a Bible, he doesn’t check how much you put in the collection,...

No. God looks at your *heart*. God knows your *heart*. He knows how much you *truly* love him. He knows when you’re fully committed. And He knows when you’re holding back. He knows when you’re genuine. And He knows when you’re faking it. He knows when you can’t get to church and he knows when you couldn’t be bothered. He knows when your head and your heart are engaged in his Word and when you truly love to pray. And he knows when you’re just following the rituals and going through the motions.

He is God. He can’t be fooled.

One of my least favourite songs is my least favourite because of the words. And the melody isn’t my style either really. But listen to the chorus:

*\* It's the hope of hopes, it's the love of loves. This is the song of every man.  
And God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us from a distance.*

Is God at a distance? Or did God come to earth in Jesus, and into our hearts by his Holy Spirit? Is God far away, or closer than anyone else?

God is not in a box that we can visit when we choose. We live **every moment** in the presence of THE almighty God. He’s not in a building, or an icon, or a ceremony. He is with us, first by the mercy seat, then by the Lord Jesus, and today by his Holy Spirit. And he knows our true heart. God cannot be fooled.

Let me pray.