**God and magic**  27/2/22 dkm

Read: 1Samuel 4, James 4

Text: 1Samuel 4:1-11

Psalms: 119:120-136, 26:2-12, 7854-64, 72old

Constantine was the first Roman Emperor to become a Christian. Pagan emperors persecuted the early church, with names like Nero and Diocletian being notorious. While fighting a rival emperor at Milvan Bridge, Rome, in AD 312, Constantine had a dream in which he was told to paint the mark of the cross, Chi-Rho or labarum, on the shields of his soldiers. After victory he wrote, ‘By this sign I have delivered your city!’ While Constantine made Christianity a legal religion throughout his empire, the method of his conversion did not bode well for the type of Christianity he promoted- a type of Christianity that is still promoted today. Constantine was not the first to mix magic with his belief in God, as we see from our Bible story today.

It was a very significant occasion in Israel when, still a youth, Samuel heard the voice of God. He was growing up in a day when the word of God was rare; not that religious practices were rare. People were still bringing their sacrifices to the house of God, but their worship was hollow, rather than hallowed, because the priests were corrupt to the core. The Lord told Samuel that he was going to judge these wicked priests and the whole house of Eli. As we come to chapter 4, Samuel drops out of the picture until chapter 7. The focus turns to Israel at war with the Philistines, or more significantly, the capture of the Ark of the Covenant. Our subheadings are, ‘Conflict with the Philistines’, ‘Capture of the ark’ and ‘Killing of Eli’s sons’.

**1. Conflict with the Philistines**

The Philistines or ‘sea-peoples’ originally came from Capthor or Crete (Jer 47:4). They settled along the coastal plain of what became known as Palestine, a name derived from this people group. They were there in the days of Abraham, and on into the time of the Judges- Samson famously got involved with the Philistines. They were a thorn in the side of Israel into the time of David, who famously killed a Philistine giant. The Philistines built five cities on this coastal plain, each with a local lord: Gaza, Gath, Ekron, Ashdod and Ashkelon.

To become a Roman emperor you had to go to war and win. It was probably the same with the Philistine lords. Even today, rulers feel the need to win a war in order to secure their position as national leader- just look at Putin! Having said this, we read that Israel went to battle against the Philistines (4:1); it is not clear who started this particular battle. The armies of Israel gathered at Ebenezer, and the Philistines gathered just a few kilometres away at Aphek (4:1). Israel had no king; they were led by tribal elders. Keep in mind that in those days victories were attributed to the gods of the victorious army. Armies would take images of their gods with them into battle.

When the two armies joined in battle, the Philistines came out on top; about four thousand Hebrews were killed (4:2). The Israelites were shattered by this defeat and loss of men. But note their response: ‘Why did the Lord being defeat upon us today before the Philistines?’ (4:3). What did I just say? If victory was attributed to their god, so this god was blamed for their defeat. Pagans saw things in such simple terms, and Israel had adopted this pagan thinking. No one asked if, perhaps, God was punishing them.

We have seen the terrible corruption of worship in Israel. Why should the Lord help them in battle when they were disobeying his commands? The God of Israel was not a God to be carried on men’s shoulders to do their bidding. There is a big difference between supernatural, in the sense that we do not see our God- although Jesus revealed him to us- and superstitious, in the sense that God is tied to holy objects, places or words. God is a living being who has spoken to us, and to whom we relate under a covenant that he has made with us.

**2. Capture of the ark**

After their terrible defeat at the hands of the Philistines, the elders decided to ‘bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who dwells between the cherubim’ from Shiloh to the battle field (4:3). They were defeated presumably, because God was not with them in a tangible way. They forgot that God is a spirit who inhabits eternity. They would bring God into their presence by bringing the ark into their presence, to save them from their enemies (4:3). With the ark in their camp, God would be forced to help them. I am reminded of Hindu students going to the market to get a huge idol of Sarasawati, the goddess of education. They set this up in their hostel, believing the goddess would help them in their exams.

The Israelites knew their God was powerful because with his help they, or their forefathers, had defeated the Egyptians, as well as the Canaanites. The Philistines knew this also (4:8). Knowing God is different to knowing about God. Thinking like their pagan neighbours, the Israelites just needed to ‘harness’ the power of their God for their political purposes.

The Ark of the Covenant was a box built by Moses according to instructions given to him by God or Yahweh. When God gave Moses the commandments written on stone tablets, these were placed in the box. The wooden box was covered with gold; it had a solid gold lid with cherubim moulded on each end. The box was placed inside the most holy place at the ‘heart’ of the tent of meeting, which was set up at Shiloh at this time. This cover of the ark was called the mercy seat, the place of God’s presence and the place where atonement for sin was made. ‘The ark pointed to Yahweh, the ruling, speaking and forgiving God’.

The two priests, Hophni and Phinehas, did not care about sins but they went along with this plan to ‘take God’ to the battle field. They were there with the ark when it was taken from Shiloh. The ark would never return to this place, and neither would they. Little did they know that ‘God’s presence’ or ‘God’s glory’ had already departed, because sin separates us from God (Isa 59:2).

‘When the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel shouted so loudly that the earth shook’ (4:5). Their shout was that of confidence in victory over the Philistines, not a shout of fear at the presence of almighty God- it was the Philistines who feared the presence of God. Maybe the Israelites were recalling the time when Joshua led their army in the defeat of Jericho. The Philistines recalled their God striking the Egyptians with plagues (4:8). Joshua was of course, doing what the Lord told him to do, but there is no word from the Lord here at Ebenezer.

The Philistines heard the great shout that erupted from the camp of the Hebrews and guessed that the ark of the Lord had come into their camp: ‘God has come into the camp!’ they said (4:6, 7). They were petrified, recalling the power of the gods that struck the Egyptians leading up to the Exodus. They assumed the Israelites had many gods, just like other nations.

Amazingly, the Philistines overcame this initial fear when the Israelites brought their gods into their camp. They rallied their troops, telling them to be strong and fight like men or they would become slaves to the Hebrews, rather than have the Hebrews as their slaves (4:9). Moreover, they had just defeated them decisively, killing four thousand of their soldiers. So the Philistines and the Israelites fought another battle, and the Israelites were again defeated, this time losing thirty thousand foot soldiers: ‘There was a very great slaughter’ (4:10). What a disaster!

Bringing the Ark of the Covenant into their camp made no difference to the outcome of the battle. Clearly their reasoning was faulty; they got their theology wrong. One commentator calls it ‘rabbit-foot theology’ because a rabbit’s foot is sometimes carried as a good-luck charm. It is theology based on superstition, not faith in a supernatural, sovereign God. This is theology that seeks to control God rather than submit to him. It is religious magic; it is trying to twist God’s arm instead of submitting to him.

Some time ago a fellow told me he kept bread and wine in his house and took communion whenever he wanted Jesus to help him. There are many who think they are saved by baptism and/or by taking the mass- they are taught this by the pope and the priests. Many carry crosses around their neck thinking, like Constantine, and like these Israelites, that God is somehow with them, and will give them success.

There are other Christians who are not superstitious as such, but who also engage in ‘arm-twisting’. Years ago a man’s daughter went missing- a very sad story as it turned out. This man turned to prayer, as we all did. He started praying day and night, and then started fasting. He was distraught no doubt, but seemed to be demanding God answer him because of this conduct. Sadly, some friends resorted to consulting a Hindu holy man on his behalf. You, like me, will have heard Christians being told to have more faith, to pray more, to fast more, to get everyone praying, and then God will heal their sickness. Sometimes we are told our prayers are not effective because we are not using the right words.

Of course the Lord wants to hear us praying to him, but he wants us to acknowledge him for who he is, not just for what he can give us; he is not Santa Claus! God cannot be kept in a match-box and brought out only when we need him, as a preacher once said. ‘Match-box theology’, ‘rabbit-foot theology’, ‘Santa Claus theology’, call it what you will, it is not biblical theology. The sovereign God will not be micro- managed by you or anyone. If you think you can hold God in your hand, how can he be holding you in his hand?

**3. Killing of Eli’s two sons**

The second battle against the Philistines, the battle in which the Israelites carried the Ark of the Covenant into battle, was more disastrous than the first. Did it mean that their God, Yahweh, was not as powerful as they thought? Of course not! It meant they had the symbol but not the thing or person symbolised- as we will later see. The loss of soldiers was almost eight times greater than in the first battle, but of greater concern was the capture of the ark of the covenant (4:11). In the eyes of God, it was all for the purpose of judging the two priests who mocked God and blasphemed his holy name as they broke one after another of his commandments while ministering in the house of God.

A man of God, as well as Samuel, both prophesied this judgment, saying that Hophni and Phinehas would both die on the same day (2:34). And this is exactly what happened on this day that the Philistines defeated Israel. In bringing the ark into the camp, they brought these two wicked priests into the camp, where the Philistines would kill them in fulfilment of the word of God. God will not be mocked. God will fulfil every word that he has spoken because he is powerful to do so.

God is sovereign. God is supernatural. God will not be manipulated or controlled by mere men. We must humble ourselves before him. Sure, we pray with confidence but not with demands. God is all powerful, but he decides when and how he will exercise his power. He has of course, done so supremely in the resurrection of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. If you are saved, born again in Jesus Christ, remember this is another evidence of God’s sovereign power. In his grace, He may choose to heal or help you when you pray, but do keep everything in perspective, God’s perspective.