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# The Power of God's Presence and A Call for Repentance

## DARRELL DELANEY

Most of us know what it feels like to want something we can hold when life gets shaky. A child keeps a blanket close at bedtime; a traveler pats a pocket three times to make sure the passport is still there; a driver grips the steering wheel harder in the rain, as if tighter hands control the storm. We reach for visible things when we feel vulnerable, and that instinct can slip into our spiritual lives, too. We can start treating prayer like a formula, worship like a lever, or sacred things like a way to force God's hand; but what happens when we confuse God's presence with something we can use? Today on *Groundwork*, we continue our series on 1 Samuel by looking at Israel's defeat, the capture of the ark, Philistine panic, and the hard lesson that the Living God is holy, sovereign, and never available for manipulation. Stay tuned.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

## DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, today, we come to one of the most sobering sections in 1 Samuel. We know in our first episode, we talked about Hannah's anguish, her prayer and the birth of Samuel; in the second episode, we moved to a time when the word of the Lord was rare in the days that Samuel was actually in the temple serving, and then God begins to use him mightily; but now, the lens is going to widen, because we are moving from one family's pain to a national and spiritual crisis.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

And what we are going to see in this third episode here of this seven-part series on 1 Samuel is that the crisis in Israel is deeper than politics or warfare. Those are some of the obvious struggles. Israel does face the Philistines. They are enemies. They have battles with the Philistines that are real. They have losses that are real. So, those are sociopolitical, military issues, but Darrell, underneath all of that is finally a spiritual problem in Israel, because worship has become corrupted; the leadership is compromised, as we have already seen from the house of Eli and his wicked sons Hophni and Phinehas, who are going to figure large in this episode. So, the people, Darrell, still have the outward symbols of the faith, but they are not living the inward, faithful, obedient life to the Lord.

## DARRELL DELANEY

And you know, that actually matters for us as well today, because that pressure, it reveals what we really trust in, Scott. Sometimes when we have hard moments, it can expose whether our confidence is in the Lord or in leaning on substitutes that only appear or look spiritual; and that is why this narrative is so piercing. Because the ark of the covenant is a part of this narrative, and that covenant is the sign of God's presence with Israel, and has been historically. It is associated with his holiness and his throne. I mean, the ark matters deeply, but in this chapter, they start treating it like a device...like a rabbit's foot...like a lucky charm as something they could use whenever they went into the war to get the result that they wanted, and that is not the case in this story.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Now, just to remind our listeners, too, so this ark of the covenant was something that God instructed Moses and Aaron to build. It contained eventually the tablets of the Ten Commandments...

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

Yes.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

It contained a sample of the manna when God started to do that; and once the tabernacle was built—the tent of dwelling in the desert—and once the temple gets built in Jerusalem later under Solomon, the ark of the covenant sits in the Holy of Holies, and was seen as the earthly throne of God. This was where God ruled the earth from Mount Zion...from Israel. So, it is a very powerful, powerful symbol. It is something God told the people to build, but not the way they are going to use it here; and I think before we go to 1 Samuel 4, we can note that in the previous episode we saw the rise of Samuel, and then the rise of hope through the rise of Samuel; but before Samuel fully rises, we have to see the end of the dark chapter first, and that is what we are going to get here. In 1 Samuel 4, we are going to be reading verses 1-11.

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

It says: And Samuel's word came to all Israel. Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek. <sup>2</sup>The 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. <sup>3</sup>When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders [of Israel] asked, "Why did the Lord bring defeat on us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the Lord's covenant from Shiloh, so that he may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies." <sup>4</sup>So 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.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

<sup>5</sup>When the ark of the Lord's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. <sup>6</sup>Hearing 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, <sup>7</sup>the Philistines were afraid. "A god has come into the camp," they said. "Oh no! Nothing like this has happened before. <sup>8</sup>We're doomed! 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 wilderness. <sup>9</sup>Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!" <sup>10</sup>So 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. <sup>11</sup>The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

So, Israel starts by asking the right kind of question: Why did the Lord bring defeat on us today? But they don't stay with the question long enough, Scott, to even repent or even recalibrate where they need to be spiritually. They move from theology to technique by saying: Bring in the ark! So, that is the issue, because they are not seeking the Lord, they are using the Lord for leverage. They are trying to gain some sort of advantage by bringing the ark of the covenant in the middle of war; that is a problem.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Treating it like a lucky charm, like a talisman or something like that...a rabbit's foot; and again, the problem is that the ark of the covenant isn't powerful as a symbol, but it is the earthly throne of God, as we mentioned earlier. We read that in the Pentateuch in Leviticus...Exodus, Leviticus and so forth. It is the dwelling of God, but you cannot reduce that to something that you can manipulate, particularly when, as is the case here, the people's hearts are far from God. They are not right on the inside. So, having the ark on the outside is not going to do any good, and it didn't do any good. They brought the ark and they were defeated even worse

than they had been before they brought the ark; and what is more, the ark actually gets captured by the Philistines.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

I think it is important for us to do heart check at this point, because, even though we don't carry arks into battle, we have sometimes thought that the right words or the right amount of offering or the right spiritual practice, or the right setting or the right signals would force God to act according to our will...according to our plans. But if God is sovereign, and God can choose to do or not do, answer or not answer, we cannot make him do anything; and unfortunately, the Israelites did not understand that. So, we need to understand that God is sovereign and he can do what he wants to do.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And the people are excited when they see the ark. They shout so loud that the Philistines are shaken in their boots, at least initially, until one of their leaders, kind of, you know, bucks up their courage and says: Come on, let's be men...let's be Philistines...let's not become servants to the Hebrews. So, they are excited about the ark but they don't honor the ark as a holy thing that calls them to repentance. They don't realize that their hearts, that are far from the Lord, the ark cannot compensate for their disobedience; and it certainly cannot compensate for Hophni and Phinehas, whom we already know from earlier in this series, were wicked, wicked men, who stole from the temple, who slept with the women as temple prostitutes almost, who came to sacrifice at Shiloh. God is not mocked. Hophni and Phinehas cannot trot the ark out and expect God to say: Oh, well, I guess they are good guys after all. I will help Israel win the battle. No.

So, this is a hard, hard word here, and the truth is devastating. They suffer a wholly terrible defeat; and again, the ark is captured. So, what God is doing here, Darrell, he is exposing false religion; he is tearing down the illusion that sacred things can replace spiritual surrender and repentance; and so, the judgment comes and shatters the lie they have been living with.

Well, in a moment, we are going to go on in 1 Samuel 4. We will hear what happens when this terrible news reaches Shiloh, where the grief will be overwhelming. So, stay tuned.

*Segment 2*

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, in the first part of this episode, we watched Israel try to manage the presence of God. They tried to leverage the presence of God through the ark of the covenant into kind of a lucky charm. It was disastrously conceived and it led to disaster. Now, we are going to go on at verse 12 from 1 Samuel 4: That same day a Benjamite ran from the battle line and went to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dust on his head. <sup>13</sup>When he arrived, there was Eli sitting on his chair by the side of the road, watching, because his heart feared for the ark of God. When the man entered the town and told what had happened, the whole town sent up a cry. <sup>14</sup>Eli heard the outcry and asked, "What is the meaning of this uproar?" The man hurried over to Eli, <sup>15</sup>who was ninety-eight years old and whose eyes had failed so that he could not see. <sup>16</sup>He told Eli, "I have just come from the battle line; I fled from it this very day." Eli asked, "What happened, my son?" <sup>17</sup>The man who brought the news replied, "Israel fled before the Philistines, and the army has suffered heavy losses. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured." <sup>18</sup>When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backward off his chair by the side of the gate. His neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man, and he was heavy. He had led Israel forty years.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

<sup>19</sup>His daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant and near the time of delivery. When she heard the news that the ark of God had been captured and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she went into labor and gave birth, but was overcome by her labor pains. <sup>20</sup>As she was dying, the women attending her said, "Don't despair; you have given birth to a son." But she did not respond or pay any attention. <sup>21</sup>She

named the boy Ichabod, saying, “The glory has departed from Israel.”—because of the capture of the ark of God and the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband. <sup>22</sup>She said, “The Glory had departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.”

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

So, sometimes, Darrell, we say that the night is always darkest just before the dawn; and here, in the early part of 1 Samuel, the night has just gotten very, very dark indeed; and although, in the long run, it is not going to be true, because we know Samuel is in the wings; but here, the daughter-in-law of Eli, the wife of Phinehas, has a child and she says what is certainly true on the surface for the moment, that the glory...the *kavod*...the glory of God has departed. She names the child Ichabod, which means the glory has left; and that is, indeed, a very, very dark moment in this narrative.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

Yes; it is one of the saddest names in all of scripture; and if we hear it carefully, it doesn't mean that God has been defeated in this war that is going on between Israel and the Philistines, it just means that Israel is experiencing a spiritual collapse, because they tried to use God as a mascot, and they tried to use a holy God to domesticate his presence and ignore his covenant and try to get a victory out of him.

So, if we think about that today, it is possible for us, Scott, to sometimes have the religious decorations and membership and the noise and the presence and all these emotions happening in different worship settings, but still be disconnected; and even a church that has history and language and attendance can be a church that is drifting, if pride is at the center of the problem, and compromise and disobedience go unchecked.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Exactly; so, this now is the end of the house of Eli. The boys are dead. Eli himself collapses in despair because his sons are dead and the ark is gone; and he dies an old man on the side of the road.

Then the scene narrows again to Phinehas' wife, and her grief is a bit more intimate and gives birth to that son that, as you said, has the saddest name in all scripture; and as you say, right. We can be guilty of this today. Maybe it is not as dramatic as all of these things, but there are times when our hearts are not right; our hearts are, if not far from God, not terribly close to God; and yet, we still think that if we ask long enough, you know, God will come through for us, whether or not we repent of not. No; that is not how that works. So, that is where this story becomes kind of like a bit of a mirror; but now, we are going to move, in this segment yet, to Chapter 5 of 1 Samuel. The ark is in Philistine territory. They think they have captured Israel's sacred prize; so, that is a trophy. So, they have got a false god there in Philistia, called Dagon, and they are going to honor their god by showing Dagon what they took from the Israelites. So then, we are going to read from 1 Samuel 5.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

It says: After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. <sup>2</sup>Then they carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon. <sup>3</sup>When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. <sup>4</sup>But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! His head and hands had broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained. <sup>5</sup>That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon's temple at Ashdod step on the threshold.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

So, this is a very, very serious and consequential chapter; but let's just admit, Darrell, this is really funny; I mean, this really actually has some humor in it. They have their god, and they are going to, you know, honor their god, except God...Yahweh...during the night just kind of goes \*boop\* with his finger and Dagon lands on his face. They have to set their god back up and try it again; and \*boop\* God sends it to the ground again overnight, and this time, breaks off the hands and the feet. So, there is some humor here, but it is proof here, too, you know, in a way, the Philistines are making the same mistake the Israelites did. They think they can use this ark on their own terms. They think they can manipulate the God of Israel by showing him their

superior god, supposedly, Dagon, and it does not work.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

Yes; I mean, this image actually preaches itself, Scott. I mean, the false god has fallen before the true and living God; and what is interesting is that Israel tried to bring the ark of the covenant in to gain some sort of advantage in the war with the Philistines. I mean, God does not need Israel to protect him. He looks like he is doing just fine in this situation, even though it looks like he has been captured, he is actually making sure they know that Dagon is not the one that is in charge here. So, God does not need anybody...because he is not the victim here; he is the victorious one and the Lord Almighty. That means that God is not going to be defeated; and I think it is really interesting how this story is about exposing human presumption, and this story is about, you know, both Israel and the Philistines, that God is showing who he is; and I think it is powerful because, I mean, you talked about the darkest night before the dawn, and Samuel is going to come in in the next segment and talk a little bit more about why they had actually lost in the war, and where their hearts need to be. So, it is really powerful to see that God can still work in the midst of crazy and in the midst of chaos; and we are going to see repentance in the next segment, so stay tuned.

*Segment 3*

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

0:17:18.5] I am Scott Hoezee, along with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this third episode of a seven-part series on the book of 1 Samuel. We have been in 1 Samuel 4 and 5. We saw Israel misuse the ark. They brought it into the battle like a lucky charm that would help them win, but because their hearts are far from God because the leadership is so corrupt through Hophni and Phinehas, the opposite happens and they suffer a terrible defeat. The Philistines think they've got a prize. They take the ark home; they bring it to the temple of their god, Dagon; and two nights in a row, Yahweh just topples Dagon, literally...figuratively and literally...and so, we are not going to read this part, but at that point, the Philistines say: You know what? I don't think we want this ark after all. We gotta get rid of this thing. This thing is radioactive. So, they do; and it goes to some temporary dwelling place for quite a while—quite a few years; but eventually, of course, we and the people and Samuel are going to want that ark to come back to Israel.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

Yes; because we have seen Israel misuse the ark; we saw Eli's house collapse; we saw the cry of Ichabod; and we have seen the Philistines discover the God of Israel cannot be captured or displayed. So, this is the part where Samuel comes back into the story, and comes back to the center. So, in Chapters 5 and 6, which we are not going to read, it shows that the ark is moving through Philistine history, just like you said, and then eventually being returned. But the real turning point here is in Chapter 7, which we are going to read, where Samuel finally calls the people to the response they should have been making in the beginning, in 1 Samuel 7.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right; so, we said earlier in this episode, the night is always darkest before the dawn. Now, in Chapter 7, we get to the dawn: <sup>2</sup>The ark remained at Kiriath Jearim a long time—twenty years in all. Then all the people of Israel turned back to the Lord. <sup>3</sup>So Samuel said to all the Israelites, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines. <sup>4</sup>So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the Lord only. <sup>5</sup>Then Samuel said, “Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the Lord for you.” <sup>6</sup>When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, “We have sinned against the Lord.” Now Samuel was serving as leader of Israel at Mizpah.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

So, as we see Samuel is doing the prophet and the priest here. He is calling them to repentance, and telling them to get rid of the Baals and the Ashtoreths; and then he intercedes on their behalf. This is the main

component of what Israel was missing earlier when they first lost the battle and they said, “Why has the Lord brought this defeat on us?” It was because they tried to use him as a mascot...they tried to use him as a lucky charm; and they did not really repent; they never actually turned their hearts to God. So, Samuel is actually teaching the people: Hey, you’ve got to get rid of all those things and serve God.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And what is interesting here is that this didn’t happen overnight. This is 20 years—this is two decades. Think about how long that is. It took a while for everything to start getting sorted out under the new and better leadership of Samuel, which also telling, though, Darrell, is that when Samuel says, you know, get rid of your foreign gods, the people don’t say: What?? Foreign gods; we don’t have any foreign gods. No; it is like, yeah, okay; we’ve got idols to Baal; we’ve got idols to his female counterpart, Ashtoreth. Samuel had them dead to rights; this wasn’t just something Samuel made up. They actually had been engaging in pagan religion, and now they are going to put those things away and have a whole-hearted return to the Lord. It took a while, but finally they come to repentance under the leadership, at a place called Mizpah, of Samuel.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

I cannot remember which theologian said it; it could have been Calvin; you could correct me if I am wrong on this. It says: the heart is an idol-making factory...

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes, that was Calvin.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

Yes, definitely Calvin. So, we have to actually pay close attention to this, because we have little Baals and Ashtoreths. We might not have little statues and little idols hanging around, but we do make them in our hearts; whether it is putting ourselves first or we want God to fix problems and not actually repent. We want God to rescue us from our situation, but we do not want to surrender to his Lordship. We need to do some heart-checking at some point in our lives as well, so that we know: Okay, this is what God wants from us.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

So, let’s sum up this episode with three truths that we can ponder: First, God is holy and cannot be managed. That is the lesson that runs through every scene in these Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7. Israel cannot use God for their own ends. The Philistines cannot possess him and use him. Their false god cannot stand in Yahweh’s presence. Our God is a living God, and the only right response to him is reverence.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

Yes; and the second thing that we need to understand is that religious symbols are not a substitute for surrendered hearts. I mean, even though the ark is holy, Israel tried to use it like just to manipulate the device, and that is a warning for us as believers, you know; just because we have Christian language or church participation or we go to church every Sunday or we do these sacred traditions, they are sacred, but they are not going to replace repentance, obedience, and wholehearted trust in the Lord our God.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

If your hearts are far from God, our coming to the Lord’s Table and taking the bread and the wine, it is judgment to ourselves, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11. Our hearts have to be right. The external things are a reflection of the internal, and when they are not, that is trouble.

So, God is holy and cannot be managed; for the second, religious symbols are not a substitute for surrendered hearts; and third, when God exposes our false securities, it is a severe mercy...it is a hard word for us to hear...or that none of us like it. When God tears down a lie, it hurts, but it is a mercy...it is a severe mercy; and that gives us gospel hope, even in a hard story like this one. Ichabod was born because they said the glory of God had departed; but now we see that the glory of God is coming back; and that reminds us that God wants to dwell in the midst of God’s people, and ultimately he is going to do that through Jesus, the Word made flesh; who, we remember in John Chapter 1: The Word became flesh and moved into our

neighborhood, as Eugene Peterson said. Literally, it says: The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. Jesus becomes the living presence of God. Jesus becomes the ark of the covenant and the God sitting upon that ark, all in one.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

It is beautiful, man, because when he comes near, he is faithful. Where Israel failed, he is standing where Eli's house collapsed and he is honoring the Father perfectly when the corrupt priests mishandled holy things. So, I love the fact that even though people try to use God, Jesus surrenders fully to the Father's will. But this story here, Scott, gives us both a warning and an invitation. The warning is clear: Don't confuse religious appearance with real faith. But the invitation is also clear: Return to the Lord with all your heart, because our God is one who wants us to start turning to him and surrendering our hearts to him. If we do that, then true restoration can begin. Thanks be to God.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us again next time as we continue our study of 1 Samuel Chapters 8-10, and the rise of Israel's first king. Connect with us now at [groundworkonline.com](http://groundworkonline.com) to share what *Groundwork* means to you. Make some suggestions for future programs.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

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