

Power without Person

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[0 : 00] We're carrying on in our series in 1 Samuel. So if you want to turn with me to 1 Samuel, we're in chapter 4. It's on page 274.

If you've got one of the reading from one of the Bibles, or if you've got your own Bible, 1 Samuel chapter 4. It starts, the bit that we're reading today, it just starts halfway through the verse. So it starts with that sentence, it's now the Israelites. So we're reading from there to verse 22. So this is God's word.

Let's read it together. Now the Israelites went to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped to Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek.

The Philistines deployed their forces to meet Israel, and as the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about 4,000 of them on the battlefield.

[1 : 00] 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. So the people sent men to Shiloh, and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the Lord Almighty, who was enthroned between the cherubim.

And Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. When the ark of the Lord's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook.

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, the Philistines were afraid.

A God has come into the camp, they said. Oh no, nothing like this has happened before. We're doomed. Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They're the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness.

[2 : 11] Be strong, Philistines, be men, or you'll be subject to the Hebrews as they have been to you. Be men and fight. So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated, and every man fled to his tent.

The slaughter was very great. Israel lost 30,000 foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

That same day, a Benjaminite ran from the battle line and went to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dust on his head. 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.

But the ark of God was killed. When the man entered the town and told what had happened, the whole town sent up a cry. Eli heard the outcry and asked, What is the meaning of this uproar?

The man hurried over to Eli, who was 98 years old, and whose eyes had failed so that he could not see. He told Eli, Eli asked, I have just come from the battle line. I fled from it this very day.

[3 : 18] Eli asked, What happened, my son? 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.

When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backwards 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 for 40 years. 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 to labour and gave birth, but was overcome by her labour pains.

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. She named the boy Ichabod, meaning 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.

She said, The glory has departed from Israel for the ark of God has been captured. This is God's word. Amen.

[4 : 35] Let me pray. Almighty God, as we come to your word today, we pray that you teach our hearts about yourself and about ourselves. Lord, sometimes we come to parts of the Bible which can seem confusing.

This is one of them. It feels quite dark, it feels quite solemn, and there's upsetting things happen. And so I pray that you'd help us open our eyes and our ears to see and know you and to reflect upon it and to sit under it.

I pray that you'd teach us and that you'd correct us where we need it and train us that we might be your servants for good works. We ask for this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Now, I'm pretty sure all of you will have seen the movie Aladdin. It's actually the live action one. It's a bit of a favourite in our house at the minute.

Anytime Heidi gets the chance, she puts it on. I mean, the cartoon is actually like over 30 years old these days, so I'm guessing most of you have seen it.

[5 : 44] For those who haven't, there's also the, you know, it's a common story that may be told lots of times. The story of a young boy who finds a magic lamp, gets three wishes.

I don't know, I remember the first time when I was wee and I saw Aladdin and I don't, first thing that you think is, if I had three wishes, what would, what would I do with them?

Kind of imagine. It's appealing, isn't it? Having a powerful genie who can virtually, within reason, give you anything you want and you're his master. Give you anything.

You think, and you just, as a kind of, I don't know, eight-year-old, like your mind spins off into what you would love to have and how it would change everything.

However, in the Disney film, Disney's Aladdin is different to the genie's previous masters, isn't he? Every other master, including Jafar, who's his master to come, is only interested in what they can get from the genie.

[6 : 53] They're interested in the power that the genie has. But apart from Aladdin, every other master doesn't give a stuff about the genie. They want the gifts, the power, but they don't care about the giver of the gift.

While it might be only a Disney cartoon, it hits on something that's true. It hits on the thirst for power is insatiable in most of us.

And we see that in Jafar. And it's not too dissimilar in some ways. Not everyone. But it's not too dissimilar to what we see in our chapter this morning. Jafar wants power and gets it, but he doesn't give a stuff about the one who's given him that power.

Here in 1 Samuel 4, we see a nation that want the power of God, but don't give a stuff about him. They want the power without the person.

They want the gift of power without the one who possesses it. And the real problem that comes across is how we've got this nation, Israel, have become like their leaders.

[8 : 10] They're kind of lusting for power. And the reason they have that is they're following these corrupt leaders. For those of you who were away the last few weeks or missed it, you've got these two leaders that you'll see where they come in verse 4.

These priests, these Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas. These are leaders who don't care about God or his people. They love power and their position.

They're back on the scene here. Before they were extorting and threatening God's people to give them what they wanted because of the power they had with the position.

The priest in those days was like a political figure as well as a religious one. And what we see is Israel have become like their leaders.

They've become like them. They've followed them. You know, as a kind of an aside, there is a warning to us here, isn't there, about who we follow. Now, God's people, it's no longer a nation.

[9 : 15] It's not Israel anymore. God's people is the church. And in our world today, as then, there are a myriad of voices vying for our attention.

Social media influences, algorithms that caress our every interest, podcasters, vloggers, that speak into our lives, often with great authority.

The rise of kind of, you know, AI everywhere. Soon, we won't be able to distinguish from what's real and what's not. And kind of the question is, you know, which voices do we allow to speak into our lives and lead us?

who are we following? Should we trust them? If we follow people that have a thirst for power or popularity, then we shouldn't be surprised if we become like them.

the people who attempt to lead us on all different kinds of platforms, we have to ask the question, do they really care about us?

[10:33] Or do they care that we're just another number on their followers that gives them that elevated position of influence and power?

Here's where we're left. This is where it leaves us. It leaves us, the problem it leaves us is this. we either go one way or the other. We either become deeply sceptical of everyone who's in power or we allow people to impact to lead us in how we think and how we live because they tickle our wandering minds and desires.

One or the other or more likely is probably a mixture of both of them in the middle. And the reason is we forget we forget that they don't really care about us.

Like Hophni and Phineas, people want power to influence us but do they want a relationship with us? Well, no, not really. Who we trust to lead us has never been more important and today from this passage the opportunity, there's an opportunity as you hear the word of God.

It is this. what if you could follow someone that you can trust 100%? Someone who will always lead you with truth, who will never manipulate you, who will never need you to boost their ratings but who actually wants the best for you and who cares for you and who wants a relationship with you.

[12:01] What if you could follow a leader like that? I want us to keep that question in mind as we think through 1 Samuel 4 where we see a nation that has followed the wrong leaders but a God who makes a way for us to follow the right one.

But first, I want to dig a little bit deeper into this problem and it's pretty clear that this is the problem. As we've mentioned, Israel are not following leaders that can be trusted but leaders that are abusive and wicked.

Coming up against the Philistines signs in battle, they've fought this group of people before in the past and they assume that victory is a done deal. They're God's people. Of course they're going to win but it doesn't work out that way.

Battle number one, they lose, 4,000 men are killed and they can't fathom it. They can't fathom how have we lost? In verse three, the question they ask, just look with me, what do they say?

They say, halfway down verse three, you'll see the question, it's when, the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, why did the Lord bring victory on us today before the Philistines?

[13:12] They're asking, why has this happened? Why has the Lord God, our God, allowed us to be defeated? Remember, these are God's people, defeat just doesn't feel right.

I wonder if we can understand where they're coming from. As the church, we don't fight in physical battles.

We don't have physical combat with other peoples anymore. But we, the church, God's people, face different battles. And sometimes in life, we don't get the victories that we expect because we're believers.

sometimes, we might go through hardship and pain and it can feel like a defeat.

And we probably ask the same question that these soldiers are asking, which is basically, why is God allowing this to happen to me, to us?

[14:19] You know, this week, as some of you, most of you will know, I've, I've not, I wasn't that well. In a couple of days, you know, the beginning, towards end of last Sunday and the beginning of the week, they were really rough.

And this week, I found myself asking the same question. Why has the God who loves me allowed this to happen?

I know I'm not the only one in the room who's asked that before. Maybe you have on rough days or seasons.

The answer that God's people come up with, the solution they look to, let's take a look at it. Verse 3. So they ask why, this is, end of verse 3, they've asked the question and then they say, this is their solution, 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.

[15 : 31] People sent them back to Shiloh and they bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord Almighty who is enthroned. But this time, who's with them? See, they go back, who's enthroned between the cherubim and with them, Eli's two sons, Hophnet and Phinehas.

They're standing there with the ark of the covenant of God. And you can imagine them, can't you, verse 5, they think this is it. There's a shout in the camp, a victory cry. It's like the kind of rousing picture that you get on, you know, war movies from ages ago, you know, kind of your brave art kind of a picture.

They're shouting, we're definitely going to do it this time. They've got no chance. We've got the living God with us. How wrong they are.

The thought that this time they think the enemy has no chance. Verse 10. Israel is defeated.

And the slaughter, and, I mean, it is graphic, isn't it? It's described as a slaughter. It is described as a one that is very great and 30,000 men die alongside their leaders and worse, the ark of the Lord, the ark of God is captured.

[16 : 53] And here's where we need to land with what's going on. The nation want the power of God without caring about him. Like Jafar with the genie wanting that power, the nation have become like their leaders, power without the person.

And, like I say, this is in our world. It's full of it. And we've got to be careful because we can be taken in by this.

Looking like the real deal whilst maybe just using Jesus as an add-on, a tool to be wielded at our discretion to get what we want, treat him like a magic lamp or a religious formula.

if we want the gifts without the giver, victory without the victor. Yet, when I read this earlier this week, I fell into a trap because I thought, well, if I'm not experiencing victory right now over my health, it must be because of some sin.

It must be because of some hidden wickedness lurking inside me. Am I just like Israel wanting God's power, the gift, without the giver?

[18 : 18] Is that the point? Here is what I want to show you, that that logic is wrong. Praying to be well and not seeing it does not mean you're wicked or that you're somehow in that moment being punished by God.

What we're honing in on is why that is true and why we can follow a leader who will keep us secure in his love, even if the victory hasn't come in real time yet.

That's what we're kind of exploring. To see that, we have to look at the main principle of the passage and here it is. This is a principle. It's the living God of the Bible is the same God over our lives today.

He's not a cartoon genie who can be mastered, but he's the Lord who does as he pleases and he won't be mastered by anyone. The living God of the Bible is the same God over our lives today.

He's not a cartoon genie we can master. The real answer to their question in verse 3, you remember their question? Why did the Lord bring defeat on us today before the Philistines?

[19 : 30] Well, the answer actually comes at the end of the passage. Just look with me in verse 21, right, the answer comes in the name that Phineas' wife gives to her newborn son.

See what she calls him? She calls him Ichabod, which means the glory has departed from Israel. It's not that the living God brought defeat.

He simply left them to fend for themselves. You see, the truth you see is that God's glory didn't depart once the ark left.

God's glory had departed a long time before. Israel believed the physical connection with the ark was all they needed. The ark was treated like a genie.

Just rub it and there's nothing can stop us like a superstitious lucky charm, a mascot whose power can be wielded at will. Now, we don't want to be irreverent here and reduce the ark to just like, it's not just an expensive box of wood.

[20 : 39] It was more than that. The ark wasn't empty when we say God's glory departed. But what we mean by it has departed is he departed from supporting and validating the leadership and the nation.

He simply couldn't validate the actions of abusive, corrupt leaders and a nation that had followed their ways. He refused his holy ark to be reduced to a magic trick.

God will not be manipulated. What happens is a tragedy and yet it is just.

Let's not forget it fulfills the prophetic word from a 12-year-old boy. The judgment is extensive. I count four places where we see it. The nation loses in battle. 4,000 die then 30,000 with Hofdi and Phineas meeting their end.

One guy escapes. Eli then passes and so does Phineas' wife. When we hear that we can be left with mixed emotions. Where is the good news here in all of this?

[21 : 46] In the midst of all these judgments how does this point to Jesus being the answer we need? Well I can I'm just going to focus on two and I want to start with Hophni and Phineas.

The priests of God look with me where they stood at the end of verse 4. They stood with the ark of the covenant of God. Essentially they stood in his presence representing him to the people.

Yet they are stood with sin that they think they've gotten away with that has not been paid for. You think of the extortion and abuse they'd committed.

You think amongst those soldiers that they're with there would have been families represented among the soldiers who these two guys have extorted and abused personally. They're seen as the ones with power but they've no interest in a relationship with the person of the living God.

Power without the person they exemplify that. They stand before God covered in their own sin wanting power. And here's where we get the way that Jesus is so much better.

[22 : 59] They stand covered in their own sin. But when Jesus stands before the presence of God when he stands before the Father he stands covered in our sin.

He willingly they look for power they demand it without relationship but yet Jesus willingly gives up his own. Jesus is the priest that all others shadow.

He perfectly represents represents and is the presence of almighty God the glory of God in the flesh full of grace and truth yet when Jesus stands before God he would stand not as someone trying to wield it something that wasn't his but giving it up.

In his trial he stands before another authority figure he stands before Pilate before the crowd possessing all power and yet giving himself to them.

As the priest he offers himself to be judged for us. And we might ask well okay what did that judgment actually look like?

[24 : 10] What did it cost him? We see a picture of it in the final tragic scene of our passage. Phineas' wife calling her son Ichabod meaning the glory has departed.

we see the arrival of this son a son born in tragedy with a name that is I mean it's not a nice name to be called is it?

His birth signifies she uses this name to signify that God has left them yet when Jesus another son is born as a baby in a stable his arrival doesn't signify glory departing but the opposite that God's glory is arriving in a human frame Ichabod's birth signifies judgment but Jesus' birth the incarnation signifies the revelation of God's glory in the face of a baby and it's at the cross that Jesus becomes the Ichabod God's presence is removed it is a peculiar glory we see at the gospel because the death of the revelation of God's glory Jesus Christ is actually the most glorifying thing God will do through his son he is forsaken and left alone why?

so that his glorious presence will never depart from us his people again the church will never be a Ichabod people the church the people of God will never be a people that God's glory departs from if that is the truth for us today it must change it has to change how we process times when we don't see victory when we're going through hardships this is you know this is what happens when we hear this in our heads when we take the logic and assume that we're not seeing victory over things in our life and we think perhaps that we're wicked or we've done something that deserved this when we're struggling if Jesus is the victor when we ask those questions how come I'm not seeing victory how come it's been years since I saw any how come I've prayed and I've still got this illness how come the victor hasn't given me what I desire if you're still telling you telling yourself that it must be something to do with you then I've got good news today the first thing is you can't make that correlation there are three reasons why we suffer

I'm going to start with a tricky one the reality is there's three things enemies that we have we have our own hearts we've got the world and we've got the evil one I'm going to start with there is a suffering that we can bring on ourselves because of the mistakes we make we can't escape that our own sin does cause damage but there are two more one of the reasons we suffer is because we live in a world cursed by sin we live in a suffering world where everyone suffers the curse of sin on the world causes suffering for all people but this is the hard one as well is that followers Jesus have a third reason we have an enemy he uses our own struggles against us causes us to suffer

physically emotionally and spiritually we have the evil one the problem we have with all of these three enemies is that we don't know why we're going through it's not revealed to us which is the reason we're suffering sometimes it's clear sometimes it's not but that makes it hard and so with knowing that how do we respond in light of all this well there is one thing we do know whatever the reason is if you belong to Jesus his glory his presence will never leave you the glory of [28 : 27] God the presence of Jesus will never never leave you to face any hardship on your own that is the beauty of the good news the good news is that we're left with a leader that we don't need to treat like a genie it's good that we can't master him and that he won't let us because we can rest a hundred percent in knowing that he is the leader who cares for us one who always tells the truth one who that we can assess all other leaders against because we know Jesus is with us even in our deepest darkest hardest moments we don't need a quick fix or a new magic lamp when we're tempted to look for someone to give us an easy answer when we're tempted to be led down the garden path by influences algorithms and manipulative voices telling us how to look or what to do so that we can somehow get power and control back Jesus says we don't have to look there for security we have a leader that we can trust who always tells the truth who will never pull the wool over our eyes he doesn't need us for popularity the Lord

Jesus is a leader who will give his life for you who has done as we come in for landing praise the Lord that Jesus cannot be mastered by anyone he's better than a lucky charm or a magic lamp he confronts wicked abusive leadership we can be confident to let him lead us we don't have a manipulative abusive leader but one who gives himself for us and today you know I don't know where you're at I said I'd had a rough week but whatever pain and suffering if currently you're in that place or at some point in your life it will happen can I encourage you don't allow the fake voices to lead you don't allow the fake voices to then afterwards lead you into condemnation or into false correlations that tell you it's your fault allow the voice of Jesus to be the one to lead you because his is the voice of one who cares for you and his glory and his presence will never leave you on your let me pray almighty God we just thank you for Jesus we thank you that he is the trustworthy leader that we need he is the one who we can trust because he doesn't need us for popularity he doesn't need us to boost his ego or his ratings he doesn't need us to gain influence or have more followers you do as you please you're the

Lord who always does as he pleases and so I pray that you'd help us forgive us for the times when maybe we have looked to other things and allowed other leaders to lead us instead of you but also I pray that for us for those of us who are maybe weary and weak today who maybe have had those voices of condemnation speak lies and tell us that maybe the reason we're suffering is because of our is always our own sin we thank you that Jesus you are humble and lowly and that when we struggle you grieve for us you mourn with us this is the kind of leader that we need and it's the kind of leader that we have and so I praise you and thank you and pray that you would minister to us continually in the week ahead through the word of God we ask for this in Jesus name Amen Thank you.