

Title: Total Defeat  
Text: 1 Samuel 41-11  
Theme: Man's defeat is God's opportunity  
Series: 1 Samuel  
Prop Stmt: God will not be mocked nor manipulated by his own people.

Read Text:

During the Sundays of Advent, we commemorate and celebrate the entrance of the light of God into this world. The light is the word of God and it came to the world through the prophets, then through the angels, then to the shepherds and then to the wise men. All of this pointed to the actual light of the world, who is Jesus Christ. But, why did we need this light? We need this light because this world is a very dark place. We would agree with that. What is more difficult to admit is that apart from the grace of God, I am a dark person. It's one thing to talk about how dark and needy the world is, but it is another thing to admit how needy I am. But, the reason why the world is dark is because the world reflects us.

The Bible is all about the gospel. Gospel means "good news." The good news is NOT that you are a pretty decent person and you just need to try a little harder to make the world nicer. The good news is that in spite of our rebellion against God, he sent Christ to be our Savior. But, in order for me to embrace the salvation of Christ, I have to come to grips with how much I need to be rescued. I need to realize that I need to be saved and I cannot save myself, no matter how hard I try or how much better I appear to be than someone else.

The opening words of chapter 4 could also be the concluding words of chapter 3. "*The word of Samuel came to all Israel.*" Since the Lord had revealed himself to Samuel and since the Lord was giving his word to Samuel, the word of Samuel was the word of God. God was speaking again to Israel. That is great news, however, Israel was not yet listening. They did not know how much they needed to hear and obey God. They needed to know how desperate they were, how dark things were and how bad of a mess they had made. They still thought that somehow, they were better than the nations around them. They were not on God's side. They were living in open defiance of God. They needed to admit defeat. They needed to wave the white flag of surrender before God and admit they had been wrong and were now ready to follow God – no matter what.

This is the most difficult thing for you to admit: I am a sinner and I have no excuse. I am spiritually bankrupt. I need to own that, but it is not natural for me to own that. It is natural for me to think, I need to rule my life and my world. This world would be a much better place if everyone simply did what I wanted them to do. But, my heart (and yours) is naturally full of self-rule, self-will, self-centeredness and self-reliance. I need to be emptied of that. I need to be disavowed of that. I need to have self-rule and self-reliance squeezed out of me. God, in his mercy puts us into situations designed to squeeze that out of us. Keep this in mind, because the story of the nation of Israel is intended by God to be an ongoing case study of your heart and

life. Self-rule and self-reliance are the enemies of your soul. One of the evidences of self-reliance is when we try to come up with ways to get God to along with what we want. But,

1. **God is not a magic charm.** (1-4)

Chapter 4 begins where the book of Judges leaves off. Israel is at the mercy of the nations around her. As a whole, the people have continued to do whatever is right in their own eyes, which is not right. They think they need a king, a military leader who will rescue them from their enemies. The truth is, they need to be rescued from themselves. They need a savior. But they don't see that, yet. God's Word has come to them through Samuel, but that does not mean that they are going to listen. So, God lets them fail. For the next 3 chapters we will hear nothing about Samuel. These chapters deal with the crisis the nation is in. They need God. They need to listen to and trust God. But, they don't yet. So, God lets them experience the consequences of their rebellion so that they will actually trust him. Israel, likes to play the "God's chosen people" card, but they don't follow God. They treat God as if he is some rabbit's foot or good luck charm who will help them with problems. They want God to make their life easier, they just don't really want to follow him. It is very clear that they think that because God chose them that they are entitled now to favored status that places them, ironically above God's law.

For many years Israel and the Philistines have been at war and Israel has generally been on the losing end. This means that they are dominated by the Philistines and are at their mercy. Verse 1 sounds as if Israel is tired of this arrangement and decides to try to break their bondage to the Philistines. They go to war. On the first day, it goes badly for Israel. 4,000 of their men are killed. Back at camp after this terrible first day of battle, the elders ask a very good question. *"Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines?"* This is exactly the moment when they need a prophet who will tell them what they need to hear. They need a prophet who will tell them the truth about their rebellion and their need to repent and turn to God. But there isn't one in the camp, so they come with their plan. They come up with their own salvation. Let's get the Ark of the Covenant and take that into the battle. That worked at the Jordan river. That worked at Jericho. This will be our king leading us into battle. After all, if we take God into battle, then we have to win, right?

Hold the phone! These guys are making an enormous and fatal assumption, right? They are assuming that God is on their side. It reminds me of the answer that Lincoln gave when asked if he thought that God was on the side of the union or the confederacy. He said, *"My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right."* Israel looked like and lived like the nations around her. She was full of idolatry, immorality and violence. She did not look like the people of God, yet when it was convenient or necessary, she tried to claim it and, in this case, attempted to force God to do her bidding. It's like the girl who asks her boyfriend to go on the family vacation before she asks her parents. "I told Ethan that it would be fine with you guys if he came with us on vacation, ok?" If God lets Israel lose now, God looks weak and in fact God would appear to be inferior to the gods of the Philistines and God would never to do that. After all, we are God's people, God owes us. Do you

know people who claim to be followers of Christ in order to get the benefits of a follower, but who do not actually follow Christ? God does not play those games. God is not obligated to bless anyone, no matter what church you are a member of, what title you have, what things you have done for God. A follower of Christ, actually follows Christ. Claiming the promises of God without actually trusting in God will never work.

Israel sends for the ark and Hophni and Phineas come with it. God is not a magic charm. He will not be manipulated and he is never forced to bless people who are disobedient to him. God will not be mocked, even by those who claim to be his. God is never in a bind.

## 2. **Emotion is no substitute for truth.** (5-9)

Ford Field is an impressive arena. If an impressive arena and sweet locker room facilities won football games, the Lions would be awesome. What if you interviewed any of my beloved Buckeyes yesterday and they said, "in our hearts, we feel like we won." It would be a joke, right? Hype and emotion don't win games any more than feeling positive will win a battle.

Here is the truth. While Israel has brought the ark of the covenant to the battle field, Israel has not repented of her sins and she has positioned herself in opposition to God. Israel does not love God or trust God. Israel is in rebellion to God and now she wants God to bail her out of the mess that she has made and she has made a mess. Judges 2.11-15 summarizes the situation:

*"And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them for harm, as the Lord had warned, and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress."*

The Philistines were a major part of that distress. They are mentioned 150 times in the books of 1-2 Samuel. The Philistines were so prominent and dominant that the land of Israel, that used to be called Canaan (after the Canaanites) became known as Palestine. It was named Palestine after the Philistines. However, the Palestinians today are not the descendants of the Philistines. They are called Palestinians because they occupied the land of Palestine. The Philistines were a terrible problem but, they were a terrible problem because Israel was in rebellion to God. Israel's real problem was Israel, not the Philistines. God used the Philistines to make them see that. Unless Israel was going to actually repent and turn to God, she would not solve the Philistine problem. The Old Testament is full of accounts where the nation of Israel has a problem that she cannot resolve and in repentance and humility she turns to God. That is not the case here. There is no mourning for her sin and confession to God. Israel is clearly in

trouble, but instead of humbling herself before God and admitting her arrogance and sin, she is going to attempt to use God to do her bidding.

The distance between Ebenezer and Shiloh is around 20 miles. When and how Eli found out about the ark going to battle with his two sons had to be ominous for him. But, for the army of Israel, it was an emotional adrenaline shot and they shouted so loud that the earth shook. If hype and emotion was the deciding factor in this battle, then Israel was guaranteed to win. The Philistines knew the stories of what happened to Egypt. They had good reason to fear and verse 8 sounds like they did. Feeling excited is not an accurate indicator of spiritual health. You may cry in church, or feel goose bumps when we sing your favorite song, or get swept up in the emotion of the congregation singing loudly. But, if your heart is ruled by anger and you still treat your family like dirt, or you are still giving yourself to sin, then, your “worship” is false. Participating in a worship concert is no substitute and feeling jacked-up for Jesus is no substitute for obedience.

While the ark represented the rule of God, (the throne), to use the throne of God without actually surrendering to the authority of God is a mockery. The nation of Israel was participating in false worship. False worship is the worship of the wrong God, or the wrong worship of the true God. The ark of the covenant was part of a God-given sacrificial system that was designed to teach Israel about the holiness of God and the need for forgiveness, cleansing and holiness. It belonged in the holy of holies behind the curtain. But Israel was using the ark as a good luck charm for war. Would God allow his reputation to be seen as weak? For the time being he would. God was not obligated to bless Israel’s disobedience and superstition. He was more concerned about his holiness than their victory in battle. They needed to lose and they needed to lose big in order to know that they really needed God. They needed to actually follow God in their hearts. God was not a ticket for a ride on a victory train, a tool to be used to build a comfy life. He is the one and only Creator and Ruler of the universe who lovingly and rightfully demands complete allegiance.

### 3. **External defeat often exposes internal rot.** (10-11)

“The ark of God was captured.” Yes, Hophni and Phineas were killed, but the Philistines “took God”. Not really. But it looked that way to them and to Israel. Now, the ark of the covenant is not God. The ark is where the Word of God was kept. It was the seat of mercy where the glory of God rested, but there is a difference between the ark and God. The ark was a tool that God used to reveal his glory but the ark itself was not God’s glory. But, this is about as bad as it could be.

Ever since the exodus from Egypt until this point over 400 years later, I cannot think of a darker day. The military defeat is massive. This is a catastrophic defeat. Instead of God fighting for Israel, a defeat of that magnitude gives you the impression that God was fighting against them. 30,000 foot soldiers are killed. Those who did not die ran for their lives back to their homes. The priests are killed and the ark of the covenant is captured. It is likely that the tabernacle at Shiloh is possibly destroyed around this time. That seems to be what Psalm 78 is saying. Wars

were understood to be ultimate battles between the gods. If you defeated an enemy, you would often destroy their temples and their images not only to prove the superiority of your god but also to ensure that these other gods could not rise again. To any rational observer, the real situation was obvious. Israel was rotten to the core. She had to spiritual leadership from the priests. The plan of her elders was a colossal failure. The nation was thrown into deeper servitude to the Philistines. Israel does not look like the people of God. Will she admit it? The external defeat was designed by God to put Israel's internal rot in their face. God would rather allow his ark to be captured by the enemy than be manipulated by his disobedient and immoral people. It didn't matter how glorious their past was, how much God had used them before, how important they appeared to be to the plan of God in the world, God will not be mocked and he is not bound by any people or any cause or any movement that tries to use him instead of actually following him.

Too big to fail, too good to fall, too valuable to flop, these are the lies that overconfident people believe that contribute to their downfall. We see plenty of examples in the military, political, business and sporting worlds, but the worst and most damaging examples are those of people and ministries who because they are "doing the Lord's work" believe that they have an exemption clause for faithful living. God has chosen me to do an important work, therefore, I can treat people like dirt, or I can live like hell, or I can embezzle funds, or get special status, etc. I think that we each have a heart that looks for something to be entitled about. We cringe when we see videos of government officials being incorrigible with police officers who pull them over for speeding. "Do you know who I am?" It doesn't look good, does it? But, it's in all of us. When we fail to have a proper view of ourselves, then our view of everything is distorted. And I mean – everything! I have had a hard time; I am entitled to some ease. I am successful, I am entitled to some respect. I have been very sick; I am entitled to sympathy. I am a pastor; I deserve unquestionable trust. I am a missionary. I've made sacrifices, I deserve some margin. I \_\_\_\_\_ (the blank is filled in with "works-righteousness"). It is in all of us. There have been some big names in the conservative Christian arena who have been and, in some cases, continue to be a blight on the reputation of the gospel and (as Nathan said to David) give the enemies of God an occasion to blaspheme.

(Chart) Obscurity – God's call – God's blessing (success) – influence – power – entitlement (trust in self instead of God) – abuse – rejection of God and rejection by God - failure

We will see this pattern played out in 1 and 2 Samuel and in the rest of the OT. It reveals whether or not a person genuinely has a heart of faith. How do you respond to God's kindness? People who respond with an attitude of entitlement and who abuse those around them (Saul) reveal the fact that they do not have a genuine heart of faith. People who use their authority in order to be a blessing to others reveal heart of faith because this is what Christ did and does.

Ephesians 4:7-10