

1 Samuel 4:1-11 | “Superstitious Religiosity”
Preached on October 17, 2021 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles to 1 Samuel 4, and we will be in verses 1 through 11.

We are really getting into our series studying through the book of 1 Samuel, seeing what it has in store for us. *[pauseeee]*

Have you ever had an issue but the solution that you came up with caused a bigger issue?

This can happen when you are cooking something.

You think that adding more flour will solve the issue, but it ruins the whole meal. *[pause]*

Or it happens when you are cleaning...

You think that using a certain chemical will clean the wood, but it strips the wood, instead. *[pause]*

There are some sayings about this sort of thing, and it's when you hear things such as: “the cure is worse than the disease.”

Or, “The solution is bigger than the problem.”

And my personal favorite, “Out of the frying pan and into the fire.” *[pauseeee]*

There's a story of when the British ruled India, the authorities grew concerned about the amount of cobras in the city.

They had an issue - cobras - and the solution was to offer a bounty on cobra skins. *[pause]*

The solution worked to perfection, until it didn't.

Some people, seeing a money-making opportunity, started breeding cobras in order to make money off of the cobra skins.

Well when the government finally realized this, they took the bounty off the table, and the result was *disaster*.

The breeders - who had a big inventory of cobras and realizing that it was no longer making them money, but losing them money - let the cobras free.

The city was overwhelmed with more cobras than it had before the bounty was put in place.¹ *[pause]*

The solution created more of a problem than the original problem.

¹<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/machiavellians-gulling-the-rubes/201610/the-cobra-effect-good-intentions-perverse-outcomes>.

There's also the same sort of thing that happened with rats in Vietnam, and I'm not sure which would be worse: rats or cobras. *[pauseeee]*

You have an issue, you think of a solution, but it only creates a bigger issue.

Did you know that that sort of situation happened with Israel?

It's true, yet it didn't involve rats or cobras, but it involved war. [pauseeee]

In the stories before this one, we found God promising judgment against Eli and his family for the sin they were committing in the priesthood.

That will come into play in our story, as Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be dealt with. [pause]

We also learned of the rise of Samuel to becoming a national prophet.

So as chapter 3 ended, Samuel had become an established prophet, none of his words fell to the ground, and the word of Samuel came to all Israel.

Then all of a sudden, as we enter chapter 4, Israel and the Philistines are about to go to war against each other.

And you would think that Israel would go to Samuel to hear God speak in order to get guidance and direction for the impending war, but they don't. [pause]

Here they had an established national prophet.

Here they had a true prophet, who God was speaking through to all of Israel, and all of his prophetic statements come true.

And yet it's almost like they ignore him, and decide to go their own way, and what we will find is it's a disastrous decision.

In fact, it's not until chapter 7 that Samuel will show up again, and only after 20 plus years.

So with that context in mind, let's READ THE STORY for ourselves...*[pauseeee]*

The first point that comes out of this story is this...

I. We sometimes try to solve our problems by superstitiously using the things of God. (1-9)

In the account, Israel and the Philistines face off against each other in war.

They go to battle and what happens? Israel is defeated, losing 4,000 men. [pause]

Now this defeat should perk your ears up because if you know the history of Israel and the wars they fight, the result all depends on their relationship with God.

When they lose, it's because they have been rebelling against God, but when they win, it's because they trusted God, and God fought the battle for them.

So this defeat signals something to us, but it also signaled something to them.

For after this defeat, the elders ask, "Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?"
[pause]

They understood that their loss was connected to the Lord, but they don't understand *why*.

Yet shouldn't they have known why? [pause]

First off, they didn't consult with the established prophet, Samuel.

But also, they didn't consider the wickedness of the priests as a reason for their loss.

They just assumed everything was right between them and God, while living in rebellion against Him. [pause]

So they didn't understand why, but look also at their response to the defeat. [pause]

Notice what they *don't* do.

They don't go to the established prophet of God, who speaks on behalf of God, and ask him what to do in light of the loss.

They don't go to God and make things right at all.

That would have been the appropriate and right thing to do, since God was the one who caused their defeat.

They don't go to God, but instead, they try to solve their problem on their own by using God.

They say, "Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies."

They are determined to simply bring the ark to the battle, thinking that the ark will win the next battle for them. [pauseeee]

Now the ark of the covenant was a gold covered, portable box.

It was a visible sign or symbol of God's presence and power, picturing the footstool of God's throne.

In Israel's history, the ark was present at significant moments.

In Numbers 10:35, we are told that, “whenever the ark set out, Moses said, ‘Arise, O Lord, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you.’”

And then in Joshua 6, the ark is carried around Jericho, where they capture the city of Jericho.

So obviously, the men of Israel knew the stories of battles where the ark was present and brought with it victory.

But they missed the part about the need to be right with God in order for God to work through his ark. [pauseeee]

They are seeing their need for something to help them in battle, but they go about it in the wrong way.

They are putting their focus in the wrong place. [pauseeee]

The problem with Israel’s thought process is that they thought that the ark was just some magical box that works as long as you bring it with you.

But that simply wasn’t true.

The ark *symbolized* God’s presence and power, and so if you are rebelling against God, then he certainly won’t just automatically defeat your enemies.

You can’t rebel against God, and then just expect the ark to bring good results. [pauseeee]

The reason why the ark brought the great victories of the past was because the people were trusting the Lord of the Ark, not just the ark itself.

Truly, it is the Ark *of the Covenant*, yet Israel wasn’t holding up its end of the covenant! [pauseeee]

So the people bring the Ark to the battlefield, and we find Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are there with the ark. [pause]

The introduction here of Eli’s wicked sons signals disaster for Israel.

Here are the two worst guys to be accompanying the ark, for we just learned all about their contempt for the Lord in the previous stories.

They have been prophesied to be killed on the same day, and whenever high-handed sin is let go in the camp of Israel, there are not-so-good consequences for Israel as a whole.

Think of the sin of Achan.² [pause]

Yet amidst all of this, Israel seems pretty confident in their plan.

² This story is found in Joshua 7.

They give a mighty shout when the ark arrives, so that the earth resounds.

And this makes the Philistines kinda worried.

They are confused at first, but then find out that it's because the ark has arrived in Israel's camp.

And just look at the Philistines' reaction. *[pause]*

In verse 7 and following, they understand that a god has come into the Israelite camp.

They start despairing because they have heard about what God has done to the Egyptians, yet they get a couple facts wrong.

They think that the plagues against Egypt happened in the wilderness, and they think that Israel serves multiple gods. *[pause]*

Nevertheless, the Philistines seem to understand the power of Israel's God, thinking that he will defeat them, yet they still determine to muster up the courage to go and fight. *[pauseeee]*

But how could they have such courage, even amidst believing that the God of Israel was powerful and was going to defeat them?

Well one reason is because they didn't want to become slaves of Israel, so they were fighting for dear life.

But ultimately, their courage was because God wasn't present to bless Israel because of their sin.

You see, God said that if Israel *obeyed*, he would send his terror before them against their enemies³, yet here are their enemies having great courage.

That's a sign of impending failure for Israel.

And failure is what we will find in the next section, but before we get to the next couple verses, let's unpack and apply what we learned so far. *[pauseeee]*

Israel superstitiously used the ark, thinking that it would bring them success.

There was no genuine heart for the Lord, no genuine repentance, but rather, a desire to succeed using God. *[pause]*

Their plan was actually devoid of God, as they sought out a way for victory without doing the work needed to correct their relationship with God.

They may have used an object of God, but they didn't go to God. *[pauseeee]*

Don't we sometimes do the same?

³ See Exodus 23:22, 27.

We often think we can solve our problems on our own or become satisfied in life, using the things of God, but without going to God Himself.

They may be great things that we use, but when God is put on the backburner, things are not in a good place. *[pause]*

Let's say you have been depressed lately.

Someone might think, "Well all I need to do is make sure that I read my Daily Bread or read my Bible, and my day will go well now."

Now certainly there's nothing wrong with reading The Daily Bread or reading your Bible, we *should* be in the Word.

Instead, the difference is if you think that just the act of reading it and getting it done, that now magically, your day will go well.

That's superstitious religiosity! *[pauseeee]*

Let's say that things have been going bad lately in your life, and then you think, "All I need to do is to make sure that I attend church this week, then things are going to turn out good for me."

That's the sort of thing that Israel was doing!

Of course going to church is good, but to think that just the act of attending is going to magically make you successful in life is superstitious religiosity.

You are acting like the things of God just automatically bring success and blessing as long as you do them. *[pause]*

In each thing, Bible reading or church attending, there needs to be heart behind it, not just the formal actions of doing it.

Those things are not just 'good luck charms' giving you success as long as you do them. *[pause]*

Just because you wear a crucifix around your neck isn't going to automatically bless you.

Just because you put a Bible on your nightstand, put a Bible verse on your wall or social media bio won't mechanically make your life blessed.

You are using the things of God as 'good luck charms', and as we see in our story, this is wrong. *[pause]*

You can't just go through the motions, come and do formal worship with no heart, and think, "I'm going to be blessed by God!"

There needs to be a vital relationship with God, not just formal worship, devoid of heart.

You are essentially trying to patch up or fix your life with superstition, which is more pagan than it is true worship of God. *[pause]*

The truth is, you could do these things with great passion and excitement, but it won't change its nature.

The Israelites got excited when the Ark arrived, they were hyped up about it, but mere excitement and shouting won't morph it from empty worship to genuine worship. *[pause]*

There may be some people in here or even some churches who show the most passion and excitement, but deep down, their thinking is not grounded in truth.

That's because loud noise and excitement doesn't necessarily mean real faith. *[pause]*

I imagine if Israel had a church service right then, everybody would be there and it would sound like they were having a great service and truly worshipping God, but they weren't.

Yes, there was excitement and noise, but it was really nothing, for it wasn't grounded in God's truth. *[pause]*

This can happen in our lives.

We can do all these good things, but when it comes down to it, are we doing it for the wrong reasons?

We are not truly finding satisfaction and meaning in God and worshipping him, but using methods, and missing the point. *[pauseeee]*

By using the Ark, devoid of going to God at all, Israel was actually trying to manipulate and force God to bless them.

They thought, "Now God must win the battle, for we brought the Ark, didn't we? He won't let us lose when we have the Ark with us."

It's like they were trying to twist God's arm.

They thought, "God MUST bless us now." *[pause]*

Can't that sadly happen to us?

Do we use the things of God to try to manipulate Him to bless us with no heart behind it? *[pause]*

Let me ask you this...

As long as our country keeps 'In God We Trust' written on our money will that automatically make our country blessed?

What if we don't trust God?!

You can't say, "Well as long as we have it printed on there. As long as we have this symbol in our country, God WILL bless us."

No, no, no, that's superstitiously using the things of God! *[pause]*

Certainly, saying 'in God we trust' is good, but mere symbols or words without a relationship with God won't do any good!

You can't just stamp or slap God onto things and think that all will be well now.

Just because God is slapped onto a company, a political party, or even your argument does not make any difference.

Just because you post a picture of your Bible open with your coffee cup on Instagram won't make your life magically blessed.

So you can't just do the things of God with no heart, and think that God MUST bless you because of it. *[pauseeee]*

God cares about the heart.

God cares about people actually trusting Him, going to Him, having a relationship with Him.

So just because you do religious things doesn't make you blessed, but also just doing religious things doesn't make you right with God, but only faith in Jesus Christ does. *[pause]*

Just going to church or being baptized won't magically save you.

Just reading your Bible or doing a certain amount of good works won't mechanically give you eternal life.

That's trusting in the things of God, rather than God Himself.

You need to trust in Jesus Christ alone to save you, who died for your sins and in your place. *[pauseeee]*

Do you ever superstitiously use the things of God?

Like I said, there's nothing inherently wrong with a lot of these things, in fact, most of them are good.

But that's just like the Ark - there was nothing inherently wrong with the ark, in fact, it was a *good* thing.

But it's how Israel viewed and used the ark that was the problem.

So also, it's how we incorrectly view and use the things of God that becomes the problem.

[pauseeee]

What's the outcome of Israel's plan? We see in verses 10 and 11 that...

II. The result is an unexpected outcome! (10-11)

Have you ever been caught off guard by an unexpected outcome?

Maybe you are trying to fix something.

So you read all up on what to do.

You read the manual, you watch every relevant YouTube video that shows you what to do, and yet when you try it, it doesn't work.

You fully expected it to work, but it doesn't.

So you're thinking, "What's going on?! They said to do this, I did what they said to do, and yet it's not working!"

"They said to do 'A' and you will get 'B', but I did 'A' and didn't get 'B'! What is this?!"

You got an unexpected outcome. *[pause]*

That's the kind of thing that happens with Israel.

They thought that as long as they did "this", they would get "that", but they definitely didn't get "that".

They got complete failure, instead. *[pauseeeee]*

We find that Israel gets defeated, and they get defeated so badly that they lose 30,000 men, and the army is completely dismantled, with every man fleeing home.

So this second battle is 7½ times as worse as the first battle!

And the loss of life is bad in itself, but also, the Ark is captured, and Eli's sons are both killed. *[pause]*

They lose the battle, they lose 30,000 men, they lose two of their priests, and the Ark of the Covenant. *[pause]*

This is one of the lowest points in Israelite history, for losing the Ark is a big deal.

The Ark was a central part of worship and life in Israel.

Talk about defeat! *[pause]*

Israel was so confident of their plan, but there was an unexpected outcome. *[pause]*

What happened was that since Israel tried to manipulate God to win the battle, God wasn't going to bless that method.

God was showing Israel that that's not how it works.

You can't rebel against God, and just expect victory by superstitiously using the things of God.

And so God was using this moment of defeat to teach them something. *[pauseeee]*

Sometimes it's good for us to experience defeat, so as to see who God really is, and to see our need for Him alone.

As commentator Dale Ralph Davis says, "Yahweh will allow you to be disappointed with him if it will awaken you to the sort of God he really is."⁴ *[pauseeeee]*

God uses the hard moments of life, even moments of defeat, to teach and refine His people. *[pause]*

Maybe the unexpected outcomes that you experience in life are gracious teaching moments of God, the ultimate Teacher.

And so we would do well to learn from them in the school of grace. *[pause]*

What is God teaching you about Himself in your defeats?

What is God teaching you about your need for Him in your failures?

Sometimes we need a wake up call to snap us out of self-dependence, so as to go to God for everything. *[pause]*

He wants us to know the truth, and to live by the truth.

He wants us to know who He truly is.

He wants us to know that we need Him, and how we are to relate to Him rightly. *[pause]*

Think of it this way, if God had let Israel win this victory, what would that have taught the people?

It would have taught them that the Ark is just a magical box, that God can be ignored and all will go well, and ultimately it would have pushed his people *further* from Him.

But for the good of His people, and for His glory, he allowed Israel to be defeated, and for the Ark to be temporarily captured. *[pause]*

⁴ Davis, D. R. (2000). 1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart (p. 55). Scotland: Christian Focus Publications.

So also, God uses the dark, hard moments of your life and works all things together for your ultimate good,⁵ and for His glory. *[pause]*

Like the Cross...

God used the darkest moment of history, the Son of God slain, for the ultimate good of His people, and for the glory of His name.

So we should approach trials, defeats, hardships, and failures with the lens of faith.

We approach them knowing that God is in control of this situation, and God is a God, who wants the best for His people, and for His glory to shine. *[pauseeee]*

Our plans may be different, it may not make sense to us, but we trust in His plans and His understanding. *[pauseeee]*

Just because we “stamp” God’s name on something doesn’t mean it will be successful in God’s eyes.

In fact, if we merely “stamp” God’s name on something, and don’t do things from the heart and according to truth, it will ultimately not be successful in God’s eyes. *[pauseeee]*

The truth is, something may look “successful” in our world today, but if done wrongly, it’s not successful in God’s eyes. *[pause]*

Sometimes we get confused when we look at people using the things of God for their own selfish endeavors and they seem successful and blessed.

But what does Scripture say?

It says that when the Lord comes, he “will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.”⁶

1 Corinthians 3 explains that people will build on the foundation with different materials, but the Day will disclose each one’s work.

Fire will test our work, and we will either receive reward, or our work will be burned up and we will suffer loss.⁷ *[pause]*

How we serve Christ must be done the right way and with the right heart, and in the end, it will be shown to be what it truly was. *[pauseeee]*

We also see this reality in Matthew 7, but it deals with salvation, and not just eternal rewards like the last passage.

⁵ An allusion to Romans 8:28.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 4:5.

⁷ See 1 Corinthians 3:10-15.

In Matthew 7, there will be people saying, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?”

And then Jesus will declare to them, “I never knew you.”⁸ *[pause]*

Those people looked successful, for they were using the name of Christ - they were stamping God’s name on it - but they didn’t know Christ.

And it is the end that will disclose the truth. *[pauseeee]*

This is all to make the point that superstitiously using the things of God will always bring an unexpected outcome.

Even if it looks successful in this lifetime, Christ will bring to light the truth in the end.

For Israel, their unexpected outcome came right away in defeat, but for others, the unexpected outcome will come when the Day of the Lord will disclose it. *[pauseeee]*

If someone thinks they are super godly because they simply wear a crucifix around their neck, God will show the truth in the end that they weren’t as godly as they thought.

If someone thinks they are doing the work of God because they stamp God’s name on it, yet they manipulate people and go against what God commands, God will disclose that.

And sadly, if someone thinks they are a Christian *only* because they went to church and have a Bible on their nightstand, Christ will say, “I never knew you.” *[pause]*

This is a good reminder and challenge to each of us that God cares about the heart, grounded in truth.

He cares that we worship Him both in spirit and in truth,⁹ and he doesn’t want us to use the things of Him superstitiously.

And ultimately in this passage, he shows us that...

God will not be used and manipulated!

You may try your hardest to use and manipulate God, but God will not have it in the end.

God is not there for you to use as a genie in a bottle.

He is not your “good luck charm” to make your life go better.

HE IS THE GOD OF THE UNIVERSE WHO DESERVES GENUINE WORSHIP AND PRAISE!

⁸ Matthew 7:22-23.

⁹ See John 4:23.

We serve Him, he doesn't serve us. *[pauseeee]*

As you evaluate your own life, do you see any hints of doing the same sort of thing as Israel?

You may not be wanting the Ark of the Covenant to accompany you into battle, but do you do something else?

Do you superstitiously use the things of God, and think that they will bring success?

Do you think that just formal worship with no heart is a good thing, or is a vital personal relationship with Him important?

Let's go to God.

Let's go to Him in heartfelt worship and genuine dependence.

Let's love Him and trust Him, and not just the blessings He gives. *[pauseeee]*

If we are honest with ourselves, we have failed many times in this regard.

We have superstitiously used God and thought that it would bring success.

We have thought that our church-going and good works would bring God's favor, but thankfully, we have a Savior who forgives.

We have a Savior who loved God perfectly on our behalf.

And we have a Savior whose perfect righteousness is credited to our account.

By believing in Him and what He did on the Cross for us, we find forgiveness for the times that we have used God.

We receive the righteousness on our account that we could never attain. *[pause]*

So let's rest in His work, his righteousness, and his forgiveness.

And let the joy of your salvation propel you to love God and to live for Him.