

1 Samuel 4:12-22 | “From Bad to Worse”
Preached on October 24, 2021 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles this morning to 1 Samuel 4, and we will be covering verses 12 through 22 today.

We are working our way through the book of 1 Samuel during our Sunday morning time, and so today is the next sermon in that series. *[pauseee]*

Have you ever had a day where everything was going bad and you thought, “This day can’t get any worse,” and it does?

Let’s say there was a man who lost his job one day, and this made his day pretty bad.

But then he got home and found out that his house’s heating system broke in the dead of winter, his dog died, and his wife left him.

His day just went from bad to worse. *[pause]*

Well that was the sort of day that Israel was having back in the story found in 1 Samuel 4.

Things were bad, but they were just getting worse and worse as time went on.

And like that saying that we often hear, sadly for Israel, “Before it gets better, it’s going to get worse.” *[pausee]*

Last Sunday, we studied through the story of Israel trying to use the Ark of the Covenant to win a battle against the Philistines.

But what happened?

They were defeated badly because they didn’t go to God directly, but tried to be the leader of God and tried to force Him to work how and when they wanted.

And they lost 30,000 men, Eli’s sons both died, and the Ark was captured. *[pause]*

That was a very bad situation for Israel, and it only gets worse for Eli’s family...

So after telling of Israel’s defeat against the Philistines, the author now goes back to Shiloh where Eli, the high priest, is waiting to hear news of the battle.

And we find out what happened to him, and what happens to others in his family. *[pause]*

I’ll READ THE STORY. *[pause]*

In this account, a messenger runs from the battle scene with news of what happened.

He runs around the town, telling the bad news, and the city cries out in mourning.

Eli, who has bad eyesight, is sitting there by the road - watching, waiting, and greatly concerned over the state of the Ark. *[pause]*

So here we find that Eli was more concerned about the Ark than anything else.

He knew there was a chance that something could happen to the Ark, and the Ark was his responsibility. *[pauseeee]*

Now because Eli had bad eyesight, he couldn't see the messenger, but heard the commotion.

So Eli asks what's going on, and the messenger tells Eli the news, and he tells it, starting from bad news to worse news to the worst news.

He says that Israel has fled, there has been a great defeat, Eli's sons are both dead, and the Ark is captured.

Eli seems to be able to handle all of the news, until he gets to the Ark part.

At the news of the Ark's capture, Eli falls over, breaks his neck, and dies, for he was old and heavy. *[pause]*

You know, usually when we have bad news, we say, "You might want to sit down first."

Well here, it didn't matter that Eli was sitting down, for the news was so shocking that he fell over backwards in his seat. *[pause]*

Can you imagine being the messenger, and the message you bring makes someone fall over and die?

I'm sure it was a shocking scene. *[pause]*

Eli's literal falling over is a picture of the fall of Eli's family line, and sadly, his family's suffering isn't over.

For in verses 19-22, we find what happens to Eli's daughter-in-law. *[pause]*

Phinehas' wife was pregnant and when she hears the horrible news, it causes her to go into labor.

And as she's giving birth, the midwives tell her the good news of the birth of a boy, but Phinehas' wife is unfazed by it.

All of her joy is gone, and she doesn't find happiness in giving birth to a baby boy, like a typical mother would.

Instead, she names her child, Ichabod, and dies. *[pauseeee]*

Poor Phinehas' wife not only faced painful childbirth, but all of the bad news on top of it.

And her naming of her child, Ichabod, was because Ichabod meant, “no glory,” or “where is the glory?”

So Phinehas’ wife thought the future was bleak, and she had no hope, for God’s glorious presence among Israel had departed. *[pauseeee]*

Here in these stories, we find Eli’s family being judged, just as God predicted.

Not only does Eli’s sons die, but Eli dies, his daughter-in-law dies, and his grandson’s birth is marred with tragedy as he becomes an orphan, and is named after a horrible event. *[pauseeee]*

This story is very dark and gloomy with a great amount of sorrow and sadness.

It kind of leaves you with this downcast feeling because there is so much suffering and death.

And so some may wonder what we can learn through such a tragic, horrible, and sad story. *[pause]*

But think of it this way: this story is given to us in the Bible for a reason.

And so even in stories such as these, God is showing us something about Himself, and I believe he’s teaching us through this account that...

God does what He says He will do. *[pause]*

There are many things in this life that we feel like we can’t trust, aren’t there?

Other people promise us something or say misleading things, they let us down, and we feel like we can’t trust them anymore.

Even our most trusted friends let us down, as not everything they promise us will happen, for situations pop up and things change. *[pause]*

Science is always changing and finding out new information which changes their previous declarations, or it’s used in a political way, which makes it hard to trust science sometimes.

[pause]

Politicians definitely tend to be hard to trust as they make many promises, only to take office and not do them.

And many of us certainly feel like we can’t trust the news, as we wonder...

“What exactly is going on? Are they leaving out something or misleading me? How can I know, it’s not like I can go there and investigate myself.” *[pauseeee]*

Especially, during the past year and a half or so, it has been hard to be certain of anything.

You thought you were going to have an event in 2020, but it got canceled.

You thought you were going on a trip, but you got sick or exposed to someone else who was.

Everything has been very *uncertain*.

We have almost gotten used to the fact that things are just going to be up in the air and uncertain, as we look at our lives, our families, our economy, our country, or our world. *[pause]*

Living in uncertainty is not a good feeling, as it causes anxiety, fear, and stress.

But praise be to God that there is one thing that is certain in this life - God will do what he says he will do. *[pause]*

That is seen in this story, as God fulfills His prophetic Word against Eli's family. *[pause]*

Two times in the stories before this one, God promised to bring judgment against Eli and his family because of their sin.

Once, back in 1 Samuel 2 through a man of God who came to Eli and announced that there wouldn't be an old man in Eli's household...

...And the sign of its fulfillment was that his sons would both die on the same day.

That sign was fulfilled to perfection. *[pause]*

God even confirmed this prophecy through Samuel in chapter 3, as God spoke through Samuel to Eli that he would most assuredly fulfill what He said, and would punish Eli's household.

And now here in our story, we have seen the sign of the prophecy with the death of Eli's sons on the same day...

...And we are seeing further evidence of the fulfillment of the prophecy, as Eli and his daughter-in-law both die.

Even Ichabod, who is born, is given a somber name and is left as an orphan. *[pause]*

Truly, God fulfills His Word. *[pauseeeee]*

This teaches us that God's Word is wholly trustworthy and reliable.

Whatever He says comes to pass.

He has a sovereign will, and his will will always come to pass.

It is accomplished through these events, as whatever God wants is done, down to every last detail. *[pause]*

These events were not coincidences, accidents, or mere happenstance - they were divinely ordered circumstances declared beforehand by the Lord God.

What God says *always* comes to be. *[pauseeee]*

The perfect God cannot misspeak, mislead, or make a mistake.

He will not and cannot lie.

As Numbers 23:19 says, “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?”
[pause]

He will never give false information.

He will never make a false promise.

But He can be fully trusted, for He is trustworthy and reliable, and therefore His Word is trustworthy and reliable. *[pause]*

The “I AM’s” words flawlessly describe what IT WAS, what IT IS, and what IT WILL BE!
[pauseeeee]

This should give us the utmost confidence in the Word of God that we have in the Bible. *[pause]*

Imagine if every time that we opened up the Scriptures we remembered...

“These are God’s Words. These words are absolute truth. These words are completely reliable and trustworthy. Whatever he says can be counted on.”

That would make us take God’s Word more seriously, wouldn’t it?

That would make us look more into His Word for ourselves, wouldn’t it?

That would make us long more for the pure, spiritual milk of the Word, wouldn’t it?¹ *[pauseeee]*

So God shows us here in this passage that what He says He will do, but more specifically, what He says He will do...

A. In judgment

It is promised judgment that God fulfills here in 1 Samuel 4.

You see, since God’s Word is trustworthy and reliable, that means that there *will* be judgment to come because he promised it.

You can’t just forsake this teaching because it’s uncomfortable.

You can’t believe that God’s Word is trustworthy, yet not believe that it is trustworthy when it comes to promises of judgment.

¹ An allusion to 1 Peter 2:2.

That simply doesn't make sense; it's completely inconsistent to do so. *[pause]*

Since God's Word always comes to be, that means even the promises of judgment will come to be.

He isn't serious when it comes to promises of comfort and salvation, but kidding when he promises judgment.

He is serious about all his promises. *[pause]*

And don't just think that only God in the Old Testament promised judgment, for Jesus in the New Testament did the same.

Did you ever read Matthew 25:31 and following?

Jesus says that when he comes again and sits on his throne, he will separate people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats.

To the sheep he will say, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

But to the goats he will say, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

That is a promise of salvation for some, but it's a promise of judgment for others - and straight from Lord Jesus' lips. *[pauseeee]*

Since we are people who believe that God fulfills His Word, then we by necessity *must* be people who believe that God fulfills His promises of judgment. *[pauseeee]*

Now divine judgment certainly isn't a fun topic, and no one should gleefully talk about it.

But it is a topic that we should talk about, and we should do it with a certain seriousness, knowing full well the weightiness of the topic. *[pauseeee]*

You must understand that divine judgment is not a mean, vengeful God giving out arbitrary judgment.

It is a loving and holy God righteously judging sin.

And so what we see in Scripture is that divine judgment is always *informed* judgment, and this is good news because it means that God always forewarns us first. *[pause]*

Through the Law, Eli and his sons knew about the penalty for high-handedly sinning against God, yet they still did it.

They were not innocent people, who had no idea, but they were fully guilty and warned beforehand of the consequences. *[pauseeee]*

The truth is, God doesn't just dole out judgment without anyone knowing that it was coming.

In Romans 1 and 2, Paul makes this point when he talks about how the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

Why? Because what can be known of God is plain to them, and although they know God, they do not honor Him or acknowledge Him.

He says, "Though they *know* God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."

And he says that because of their hard and impenitent hearts they are storing up wrath for themselves on the day of wrath when God's *righteous* judgment will be revealed.² [pause]

Do you see it?

People are without excuse because deep down they KNOW there is a God who they are accountable to.

So deep down they have been informed of judgment before judgment ever comes to them. [pauseeee]

It is all of grace that God forewarns us of judgment for our sin.

And all people are guilty of sin, and therefore God's judgment is always *deserved* and *righteous* judgment. [pause]

Just like Eli and his sons' judgment was deserved judgment, so also God's judgment against sin is always deserved. [pause]

It wasn't that God did us wrong, but it's that *we* rebelled and pushed away from God.

We are the offending party, not God - He is the completely innocent party.

Therefore, God's judgment is righteous judgment against deserving sinners, who have been forewarned of the consequences of their rebellion.

So we have no excuse, we have no ground to stand on, and we have no complaint of injustice to file. [pauseeee]

And here in this story, we see the nature of the judgment of God: it involves God's glory departing. [pauseeeee]

God's glory was often associated with His presence, which makes sense in this context with the Ark being taken.

² All of this is summarized and taken from Romans 1:18-2:5.

It's like God had left Israel, he had departed, he was exiled, he was gone from Israel.

This was a big deal, and even Phinehas' wife understood the gravity of the situation, so much so, that she named her child after the situation and breathed her last breath at the news of it. *[pause]*

God's presence or glory departing is an indicator of God's great displeasure against sin.

And it led the people to think, "What future or hope do we have with God gone?" for they understood that there was no hope without God. *[pauseeee]*

God's judgment *is* life apart from God, and if you live life apart from God now, then in future judgment, you will get what you asked for, life apart from God's presence. *[pause]*

Obviously, God is present everywhere, but when there is sin involved, the blessing presence of God cannot reside with those who despise his name.

So judgment *is* the loss of God's presence to bless. *[pause]*

This is seen in Hell, where of course God is everywhere and his judging presence is in Hell, but not His comforting presence.

As 2 Thessalonians 1:9 says, "They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might."

As Matthew Henry states, "If God go, the glory goes, and all good goes."³ *[pauseeee]*

So often people think that happiness means living a life without God, and just living for oneself.

But Israel understood that that was the furthest thing from the truth.

Blessing, life, and joy come from a life with God at the center, and when God departs, it is without fail horrific news. *[pauseeee]*

God does what he says he will do in judgment.

What hope do we as sinful people have when that statement is absolutely true?

Who can endure his coming? Who can stand?⁴

Well I've got good news for you this morning...

If God does what he says he will do in judgment, that means he also does what he says he will do...

B. In salvation

³ <https://www.christianity.com/bible/commentary/matthew-henry-concise/1-samuel/4>.

⁴ See Malachi 3:2.

God fulfills His Word, always.

And so this means we can hold fast to His promises of salvation in faith, by which he saves us from those forewarnings of judgment! *[pauseeee]*

In love, God promises and works good and salvation out of His judgment. *[pause]*

Think of Israel.

Israel thought that this judgment that they were experiencing the effects of was the end of them.

But that's not the case.

There was judgment for Eli's house and Israel felt the effects of it, but God was working something good underneath it all.

He was certainly judging out the old, wicked leadership of Israel, but this was meant to refine His people and prepare them for their future. *[pause]*

He let his Ark be captured, and the glory to depart Israel, but God was still in control, working His plan.

He wasn't worried, for He was the ultimate architect of these events. *[pauseeee]*

Israel felt like they had no hope, and they thought that God was abandoning them forever.

They thought it was all over, but how foolish of them!

Didn't they remember that God does what He says He will do in salvation, just as much as judgment?

Through the raising up of Samuel before this happened, he was showing that He had a plan for them and a future.

God wasn't done with Israel.

God hadn't forgotten His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but His Ark would once again return. *[pause]*

Through these horrific events, God was doing it for the ultimate good of His people, getting rid of the old leadership, in order to prepare the way for the new.

And he was doing it for His glory, for as we will see in the next chapters...

...God will show His people that He doesn't need an army to get the Ark back, for He is more than able to take care of Himself. *[pauseeee]*

Even amidst terrible circumstances, God's promises of salvation will come true.

Even in defeat, God was at work fulfilling His Word.

Even in defeat, God was in control.

Even in judgment, God was good.

He will always do what He says He will do *in salvation*. [pause]

This should bring eternal comfort for us who believe in Jesus Christ.

What have we to fear? God will save because He said He will save. [pause]

Even though this world is dark, times will get harder and darker, yet we know that we are saved and Christ will one day deliver us once and for all when he comes back again.

So set your hope fully on the grace to come, for we have a living hope!⁵ [pauseeeee]

Israel was right to feel sorrow.

Israel was right to feel loss.

But they didn't have to despair.

God's glory may have departed, but it would be back, for...

God does what He says He will do in judgment, but also in salvation! [pause]

Israel faced a dark day in the story of 1 Samuel 4.

It seemed like God had been defeated, for His Ark was captured.

But even in the darkness of judgment, God was at work, doing what He said He would do.

And He went so far as to let his Ark be captured in order to deal with sin, and cleanse out Israel's rebellious ways in Eli's line. [pause]

So also, God went so far as to have His Son die for our sins!

It was a dark day as Jesus hung on the Cross, taking the judgment for sin that we deserved.

It seemed like the Messiah was defeated, for He died.

But on that dark day, God was at work, doing what He said He would do in judgment, as he judged our sin when it was laid on Christ. [pause]

But he was also doing what He said He would do in salvation, as He provided the spotless Lamb, who takes away the sins of the world.⁶ [pause]

⁵ A combination of 1 Peter 1:13 and 1 Peter 1:3.

⁶ See John 1:29.

So now because he died and rose again, we don't have to face judgment for our sin, for he took it.

Now because Christ felt the presence of God depart, as he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me..."⁷

...We don't have to ever say, "The glory has departed," for the curtain of the temple has been torn,⁸ and through Christ, we can boldly approach the throne of grace.⁹ *[pause]*

And now, instead of receiving the judgment that he promised towards guilty sinners, we receive the promised salvation of forgiveness and life that he promised to those who believe in His Son. *[pauseeee]*

You know, this story was weighty, there was a lot of suffering and death...

...And it reminds us that God deals severely with sin, but even in His judgment, he was doing something good for His people.

So also, God dealt severely with sin, so much so that His own Son had to die in our place, but even in that judgment for sin, he was doing something good for His people, providing salvation. *[pause]*

Praise God that what He said He would do, *He did*.

And that gives us utmost confidence that as we look at our present situations and our future hope, we can trust that what God says He will do. *[pauseeeee]*

Oh, the difference that having confidence in God's Word makes!

May we be people who truly believe that what God says he will do. *[pause]*

Imagine a teenager, rejected by his or her peers, starting to feel lonely, but who holds the truth dearly that, "He will never leave me or forsake me."¹⁰ *[pause]*

Imagine a person starting to become overwhelmed by the suffering of life all around them, yet they are fully confident that Christ is coming soon, and like John, they say, "Come, Lord Jesus!"¹¹ *[pause]*

Imagine a person struggling greatly and beaten down with trial after trial, yet they come and boldly sing the promises behind the words...

⁷ Matthew 27:46.

⁸ See Matthew 27:51.

⁹ See Hebrews 4:16.

¹⁰ See Joshua 1:5.

¹¹ See Revelation 22:20.

“Day by day and with each passing moment, strength I find to meet my trials here; trusting in my Father's wise bestowment, I've no cause for worry or for fear.”¹² *[pause]*

And imagine a person on their deathbed, knowing that the end of their physical life is near...

...And with tears rolling down their cheeks, they assuredly believe, “Away from the body, but at home with the Lord.”¹³ *[pauseeee]*

That's the difference that it makes in a person who knows and believes that God is a God who does what He says He will do.

Do you believe that?

And will you trust His promises this week?

¹² Hymn called, “Day by Day,” by Lina Sandell. Lyrics found at:
https://hymnary.org/text/day_by_day_and_with_each_passing_moment.

¹³ See 2 Corinthians 5:8.