God Rescues His Ark

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God’s people are to trust in Him alone and not fall into the trap of spiritual superstitions.

MAIN PASSAGES: 1 Samuel 4:2-7,10-11; 6:13-16,19-21

Have you ever used a paper clip for a purpose other than clipping paper together? Maybe you used one to replace a broken zipper handle, prop up a mobile phone, or retrieve something from a very small space. These and many other ideas have popularly become known as “life hacks.” The idea is to use time and tools more efficiently. Simple household items, such as a toothpick or a rubber band, can solve some complications in your life to make things easier.

What are some life hacks you have used recently?
Group Time

Point 1: The people confuse the symbol of God’s presence with His actual presence (1 Sam. 4:2-7, 10-11).

2 The Philistines lined up in battle formation against Israel, and as the battle intensified, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who struck down about four thousand men on the battlefield.

3 When the troops returned to the camp, the elders of Israel asked, “Why did the LORD defeat us today before the Philistines? Let’s bring the ark of the LORD’s covenant from Shiloh. Then it will go with us and save us from our enemies.”

4 So the people sent men to Shiloh to bring back the ark of the covenant of the LORD of Armies, who is enthroned between the cherubim. Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

5 When the ark of the covenant of the LORD entered the camp, all the Israelites raised such a loud shout that the ground shook.

6 The Philistines heard the sound of the war cry and asked, “What’s this loud shout in the Hebrews’ camp?” When the Philistines discovered that the ark of the LORD had entered the camp, they panicked. “A god has entered their camp!” they said. “Woe to us, nothing like this has happened before.

The elders rightly looked to God as the cause of their defeat (see Job 1:21-22). God’s sovereign hand delivered the Israelites to the Philistines for one singular reason—sin. But instead of looking for the sin amongst the people, the elders believed the ark of the covenant itself, the symbol of God’s presence, would turn the battle in their favor.

What are some symbols of Christianity we can revere without honoring the God behind the symbol?

10 So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and each man fled to his tent. The slaughter was severe—thirty thousand of the Israelite foot soldiers fell. 11 The ark of God was captured, and Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

Jesus’ Deity: Within the ____________ of Jesus Christ, there are two natures—the divine nature and the human nature. Scripture teaches He is fully divine and fully human. His divinity is on display in passages that describe Him as being ____________ with God (John 1:1-18; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-3).
Point 2: The people receive the symbol of God’s presence with joy and worship (1 Sam. 6:13-16).

The Philistines captured the ark and put it in the temple of their god Dagon; they believed they had bested the God of Israel in defeating the Israelites. They misunderstood the situation, however. God let them win to execute judgment on Eli’s sons and to teach His people and the Philistines a lesson: The Lord fights for His own glory.

What role do God’s people have in God receiving glory?

13 The people of Beth-shemesh were harvesting wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they were overjoyed to see it. 14 The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there near a large rock. The people of the city chopped up the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. 15 The Levites removed the ark of the Lord, along with the box containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. That day the people of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the Lord. 16 When the five Philistine rulers observed this, they returned to Ekron that same day.

The Lord Himself brought His ark of the covenant home to Israel. The Israelites didn’t go after it or bargain for it; they moved on with life. But all the while, the Lord was working and displaying His glory among the Philistines. When the ark returned to the promised land, the people of Beth-shemesh immediately responded with joy and worship in the form of sacrifices for the symbol of God’s presence had returned, the glory of the Lord was among them once more.

What should our worship look like as living sacrifices for the glory of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ (Rom. 12:1-2)?

Voices from Church History

“God restored the ark of Israel by sending illustrious miracles, so that he might show that his church is gathered and protected not by human decisions or strength but by divine power.”

–Viktorin Strigel (1524-1569)
Point 3: The people fail to honor the holiness of God’s presence (1 Sam. 6:19-21).

19 God struck down the people of Beth-shemesh because they looked inside the ark of the LORD. He struck down seventy persons. The people mourned because the LORD struck them with a great slaughter. 20 The people of Beth-shemesh asked, “Who is able to stand in the presence of the LORD this holy God? To whom should the ark go from here?”

21 They sent messengers to the residents of Kiriath-jearim, saying, “The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and get it.”

The Israelites at Beth-shemesh received the ark with joy, worship, and sacrifices. But then the Lord punished seventy inhabitants of the city with death. What was their offense? They looked upon and into the ark of the covenant, the symbol of God’s presence. Once again, God’s people treated casually what should have been regarded as holy.

God Is Holy: God’s holiness refers to His ______________________ in being separate from all He has created. The Hebrew word for “holy” means “separate” or “set apart.” God’s holiness also refers to His absolute ____________. God is ______________________ by the evil of the world.

The Lord commanded His people Israel to be holy as He is holy (Lev. 19:1-2). As the people of God, they were to be different from the nations around them. But when the Lord punished those who did not respect His ark, the people of Beth-shemesh responded just as the Philistines did—they wanted to send the ark away. The fear of death came upon them, and instead of running to God in faith and repentance, they ran away from His holy presence.

How can repentance distinguish Christians from the world and be a witness to the world?
My Mission

Because God lives in us, we display God’s presence to the world around us by properly honoring, worshiping, and serving God.

- What step of faith will you take because God is holy and full of grace?
- How can your group encourage fear-free confession of sin and holy living amongst yourselves?
- What are some circumstances in which you need to express repentance in order to share the gospel?

Voices from the Church

“God wants us to bow before his holiness with respect and reverence. There is a danger in being in the presence of the Lord of Hosts, especially when we come into his presence with arrogance or apathy. We must come before his presence with quiet humility and brokenness.”

–Stephen J. Andrews and Robert D. Bergen

Notes
The ark of God had become a superstition for the Israelites. Yes, the ark represented God’s presence with His people, but they seem to have gone beyond that. They thought they could find victory in the ark instead of through the God of the ark. We should not be surprised to read of the defeat that followed. God is a jealous God, a consuming fire, and He will not allow His people to trust in anything but Him—for His glory and His people’s good.

God is no less jealous today. We may not have an ark to trust in, but we can make the same mistake in different ways. We have our own superstitions. We can place our trust in church attendance: If we miss a week, we fear God might chastise us, or we believe we can earn His blessing by our faithful attendance. Similarly, we can trust in our behavior, our theological acumen, our denominational allegiance, or a host of other psychological talismans.

There might not be anything inherently wrong with some of these things—they can be good things—but they are not the one thing upon which we are to place our trust. Our trust for ultimate salvation and daily sustenance is to rest on Christ and His completed work alone. All else is superstition, and it will not take our gracious God long to bring defeat into our lives so that victory—trusting in Him alone—may follow.

What might you be prone to trust in rather than in Christ alone?
Day 2: Read 1 Samuel 4:12-22

Eli’s daughter-in-law was close, but not close enough. We read about her declaration that the glory of the Lord had departed because of the ark’s capture, and then she named her son “Ichabod,” which means “Where is the glory?” (vv. 19-22). She was right to lament the departure of the Lord’s glory, but she missed why His glory was gone. It was not because the ark of the Lord was removed from the people but rather that the people had removed themselves from the Lord of the ark.

We too should be quick to recognize the severity of limiting or removing God’s glory from around us, even to the slightest degree. We too should mourn and lament when God is not glorified as He ought to be. Our first response should not be to look outside of ourselves for why His glory has been diminished but rather within ourselves. We are here to be conduits of God’s glory. May we earnestly desire to declare the glory of our God in word and deed so that others may join us in basking in its beautiful radiance.

What opportunities do you have to glorify God in the days and weeks ahead? How will you?

Day 3: Read 1 Samuel 5:1-12

The Philistines had a choice to make. They had witnessed the sobering, numbing power of God. The statue of Dagon, their false god, had fallen face first before the ark of the Lord and broken into pieces. The message was clear: All will bow to the one true God, and nothing will stand before Him. Faced with this reality, the Philistines had to decide what they would do with this God. Their answer was to send the ark away out of fear instead of turning to the Lord in repentance.

God’s power and holiness is indeed a barrier between sinful humanity and Himself; the Philistines were able to recognize this. But what they failed to understand was that God’s desire is not for His holiness to drive people away from Him but toward Him. Yes, our sin has created an uncrossable barrier between us, but it is only uncrossable from our side. He has made a way—the way—in Christ for us to be forgiven of our sin so that we no longer need to recoil in fear before His holiness. The ark was God’s reminder that He was making a way for people to be restored to relationship with Him through His coming to humanity, not the other way around.

As Christians, how should we balance a proper healthy fear of holy God with knowing God is our loving Father who accepts us entirely in Christ?
Day 4: Read 1 Samuel 6:1-16

The Philistines were pretty sure they needed to get rid of the ark from their presence, but they wanted to be completely sure. They wanted to know that if they removed the ark, they would also remove the plagues that had troubled them. So they devised an ingenious test. They hitched two untrained cows to the cart pulling the ark and placed their calves in a pen. Untrained cows would normally not be able to work together to pull a cart, and these milk cows would not be inclined to leave their calves behind. If the cows struggled to pull the cart or turned toward the pen, which corralled their calves, the Philistines would know it was not the ark bringing trouble upon them. But when the cows did indeed pull the cart down the road, the Philistines knew for sure what had caused their troubles.

Don’t miss this: God worked through unbelieving Philistines hitching cows to a cart. Why are we slow at times to believe God is at work in our lives and wants us to know His will and His ways?

In what way or ways might you have missed God at work in your life recently?

Day 5: Read 1 Samuel 6:17-21

The ark had made its way to Beth-shemesh, or rather, the Lord had brought it there. New location; same result. When seventy Israelite men failed to treat the ark with its requisite holiness, God struck them down. In some way, these men had treated that which was holy as if it were profane. They failed to treat the ark of the Lord with reverence. Just as it was a mistake to view the ark as a superstitious talisman, viewing it as a normal everyday item was just as much of a mistake, and seventy men paid for their irreverence with their lives. Then the rest of the town, just like the Philistines before them, hurried to rid themselves of the ark and send it on its way.

God is holy, and His holiness is not diminished in the slightest for His children—those who have trusted in Christ. Yes, our sins are forgiven. Yes, we have received Christ’s imputed righteousness. And yes, we are welcome to approach God as our loving Father. But even still, we should never forget that we always come before a holy God. Let us be careful never to treat He who is holy as if He were profane.

How might you tend to approach God irreverently: too casually, forgetting He is holy, or too cautiously, forgetting He is your Father?
Encourage One Another

Join together with 2-4 people from your group, or with your family, sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and you are responding.

Share your thoughts and reflections on the truths from Scripture in this session:

- The people confuse the symbol of God’s presence with His actual presence (1 Sam. 4:2-7,10-11).
- The people receive the symbol of God’s presence with joy and worship (1 Sam. 6:13-16).
- The people fail to honor the holiness of God’s presence (1 Sam. 6:19-21).

How have you responded to these truths from Scripture?

Have you ever noticed any superstitious tendencies in yourself? What do you think these things reveal about where your trust lies?

Does God need us to defend Him or His reputation? Why or why not? How should we respond in faith when Christ is being maligned?

Notes
UNIT 10

SESSION 1

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

UNIT 11

SESSION 1

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

SESSION 4

SESSION 5

SESSION 6

UNIT 12

SESSION 1

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

SESSION 4
3. Martin Luther, Luther’s Large Catechism, trans. John Nicholas Lken (Minneapolis, MN: The Luther Press, 1908), 44.
In this volume of *The Gospel Project*, we cover the roughly one hundred and twenty years of Israel’s heyday: the united monarchy. After decades of the devastating cycle of sin and deliverance and being ruled by a series of judges, the Israelites called on Samuel to appoint a king for them—one like those of the nations around them. God warned His people that what they were requesting would lead to heartache and trouble, but they insisted. So God, in His kindness, gave them what they wanted in order to teach them to trust Him.

What followed was a series of three kings: Saul, David, and Solomon, each ruling for about forty years. In some ways, these kings provide us with examples to follow: the fierce determination of David not to stand for anyone impugning God’s character; the mercy and kindness David showed to a foe and his family; the wisdom of Solomon. But we also discover that each of these three men fell woefully short of being the king God’s people wanted and needed, each one proving God’s warnings true. Bookending God’s people crying out as one for a king at the start of this volume, by the time we finish, we encounter God’s people being divided into two kingdoms.

Our takeaway is clear: The hope of humanity does not rest in any human king or leader but is fixed solely and securely in the King of kings, Jesus Christ. But at the same time, we see that God delights in using His people despite their failings. God would fulfill His covenant with David, even though he committed adultery and murder. This reaffirmed the promises God had made to Abraham generations before. And though Solomon would succumb to polygamy and idolatry, God used him to build the temple, a place for God’s people to worship and be in relationship with God.

So consider as you study: What might God do through us?