

5. Is our God a lucky charm?

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Rabbit's foot, four leaf clover, Virgin Mary statue on a car dashboard, Virgin Mary picture on the wall, Saint Peter statue, Saint Joseph statue, rosary and crucifix. What do they have in common? They are all considered as lucky charms. The purpose of these items is to bring good luck, good health, fortune or whatever good things to our lives. The actual original definition of "charm" is coming from "casting a spell to one." In other words, these items are supposed to cast spells onto the messy situations we are in, so that they could turn the situation to better for us. That means that if we rely on these lucky charms, we are considering these as idols.

This morning we find the Israelites facing formidable foe, Philistines at the battle line. They wanted to defeat Philistines, so they were going to rely on the lucky charm over their God.

A. BRINGING THE ULTIMATE LUCKY CHARM

1 Sam 4:1-3 And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines, and encamped beside Ebenezer; and the Philistines encamped in Aphek. Then the Philistines put themselves in battle array against Israel. And when they joined battle, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men of the army in the field. And when the people had come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord from Shiloh to us, that when it comes among us it may save us from the hand of our enemies."

The Israelites were asking, "Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistine?"

It is a wrong question to ask. They should have examined themselves why God allowed them to be defeated.

How often do we blame God for bad things happen to us even though we are the ones who caused all that havoc.

Israel lost 4,000 men in the first battle, and this should have been evidence to them that God was displeased. Did they repent and turn to God in prayer and confession? No! Instead they resorted to superstition and took the ark of the covenant to the battlefield. They could not take the ark out in faith because God had not commanded them by His Word. They were acting by chance and not by faith. Because the ark had gone before the nation in the wilderness and had marched in victory around Jericho, they thought its presence would assure them victory over the Philistines. Instead of revering the ark as the symbol of God's presence, they turned it into a religious lucky charm!

They were not considering that it was the Lord who saved their ancestors from the hands of Egyptians. But now they'd rather rely on a golden box that is nothing more than a box without God.

If we have cross necklaces on our necks or crucifixes on our car dash boards without God in our hearts, they won't protect us from disasters.

To some people, the crucifix is nothing more than a decoration or something less. Singer Madonna was wearing a cross necklace one day. Someone asked her if she is a Christian. She answered to that person, "No, I am just wearing this, because a sexy naked man is hanging on it." It is not a surprising answer from her. But then again, that answer reflexes the society we are living in.

The issue should not be how many crucifixes we have around us, the real issue is how much the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross go through our hearts.

1 Sam 4:4-5 So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from there the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who dwells between the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. And when the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel shouted so loudly that the earth shook.

We, human, can get a false sense of security through religion. This could have been an ultimate praise gathering program. I said "program", not intimate relationship with God Himself. All the hooplas and cheers went on and people jumping up and down with excitement. Then what? Did they hear God or did they obey God? God really doesn't care how high we jump up and down with excitement, but He very much cares how straight we walk in the Lord.

1 Sam 4:6-9 Now when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, "What does the sound of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" Then they understood that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp. So the Philistines were afraid, for they said, "God has come into the camp!" And they said, "Woe to us! For such a thing has never happened before. Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness. Be strong and conduct yourselves like men, you Philistines, that you do not become servants of the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Conduct yourselves like men, and fight!"

The Philistines were first afraid, then determined that they were going to behave like brave soldiers! Since God had forsaken His people, the Philistines had an easy victory. This is a vivid description of this tragedy. Hophni and Phinehas were ungodly priests and their presence brought judgment, not blessing.

V8 "these might gods" The Philistines were polytheists. They assumed that the Israelites also had many gods like them.

1 Sam 4:10 So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent. There was a very great slaughter, and there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers.

The enemy of God, satan is not afraid of our religion. As a matter of facts, he encourages us to get into religion, not the relationship with Jesus.

God didn't bless Israel's superstitious belief in the power of the ark instead of the power of God. We often make the same mistake the Israelites made. We assume that whatever we do as Christians are God anointed and initiated. It is not so. Our own effort without God's anointing always winds up in more trouble and mockery from our enemies and non-believers.

20 But if we walk in His Spirit and do the things in the way He wants, we can count on Him anytime.

1 John 5:14-15 this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.

1 Sam 4:11 Also the ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

The Israelites thought the ark would deliver them from defeat, but they were not only defeated, but also the ark was captured. They made it into an idol, God allowed them to lose their idol. It is the same in our lives. As children of God, if we seek anything or anyone else other than God, it is nothing more than an idol. God will not put up with sharing our hearts with anyone or anything else. He will take away the idol, whether it is our money, jobs, or even the ministry for the Lord. Can a ministry for the Lord be an idol? Yes, if it starts to take over the position of God in our hearts.

Since the first warning by the unnamed prophet, God who has tremendous mercy gave so much time for these two sons of Eli to repent from their wicked ways, but they didn't.

B. THE GOD'S JUDGEMENT UPON ELI'S FAMILY

1 Sam 4:12-18 Then a man of Benjamin ran from the battle line the same day, and came to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dirt on his head. Now when he came, there was Eli, sitting on a seat by the wayside watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told it, all the city cried out. When Eli heard the noise of the outcry, he said, "What does the sound of this tumult mean?" And the man came quickly and told Eli. Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes were so dim that he could not see. Then the man said to Eli, "I am he who came from the battle. And I fled today from the battle line." And he said, "What happened, my son?" So the messenger answered and said, "Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has been a great slaughter among the people. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead; and the ark of God has been captured." Then it happened, when he made mention of the ark of God, that Eli fell off the seat backward by the side of the gate; and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years.

Why is Eli so nervous? He might have been as foolishly confident as the soldiers of Israel were when the Ark of the Covenant came into their camp (1 Samuel 4:5). Instead, Eli knows he has let the ark go on an unwise, superstitious errand, and his conscience makes him fear it will end in disaster.

As Eli hears the commotion in the city regarding the loss of the battle, the priests, and the ark, he asks for information, and the messenger tells him the story of bad to worse to worser (great English, huh?) to worst:

Bad - *Israel has fled before the Philistines.*

Worse - *There has been a great slaughter among the people*

Worser - *Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead.*

Worst - *And the ark of God has been captured.*

God had promised that Eli's two sons were to die on the same day as a sign of judgment on the house of Eli (1 Samuel 2:34). God had not announced the promise that

Eli would also die the same day. God tells us much in prophecy, but not everything. Some of it is only seen in its fullness after it has already happened.

C. MORE TRAGEDY

1 Sam 4:19-22 Now his daughter-in-law, Phinehas' wife, was with child, due to be delivered; and when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and gave birth, for her labor pains came upon her. And about the time of her death the women who stood by her said to her, "Do not fear, for you have borne a son." But she did not answer, nor did she regard it. Then she named the child Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel!" because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. And she said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."

Poor wife of Phinehas! Pregnant, she hears of the death of her husband, her brother-in-law, her father-in-law, a slaughter among the soldiers of Israel, a lost battle, and the capture of the Ark of the Covenant all on one day! The anguish is too great, and labor pains came upon her. Her own death due to anguish and delivery and the infant child without mother and father.

The glory of the Lord is not resided on the ark element itself. We have to stop thinking God in our size and our realm. He has infinite wisdom and He measures the universe with a span of His hand.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) We should not put our trust on lucky charms, but God.

Had the glory of God truly departed from Israel? In one sense, yes. The glory left when Israel stopped repenting and trusting God and started superstitiously trusting in the ark itself.

It doesn't matter what kind of forms or previous results to others "Lucky Charm" may brought. God is the only One we can trust and follow.

Tragically, the same could be said of many churches, many ministries, and many individual Christian lives, nowadays. The glory of God has departed from them. They are still pastors, there are still churches, but God is not enthroned in glory among them. There is the form of godliness, without the power (2 Timothy 3:5). We can write "Ichabod" across many churches, many ministries, and many individual Christian lives!

2) God's judgement may not happen instantly, but it does a complete job as God promises.

Firstly, God allowed it as a righteous judgment upon Israel as a nation and the family of Eli. They simply received what they deserved. Secondly, God allowed it as a correction to the nation, so they would not trust in the ark of God, instead of trusting in the God of the ark.

We don't want to go against God. When we know that we did wrong things, it is better to come to God and repent and turn away from our sins fast. Because His millstone may not go around fast, but it grinds exceedingly fine.

3) God will turn tragedy into triumphant to bring glory to Himself.

It seems that the Israelites lost battles, many soldiers, the high priest and the ark. What a tragedy! What can good come out of this?

Many circumstances we regard as a calamity, God uses in a marvelous way to glorify Himself. Our situation may be terrible and beyond reach and repair. Let's not lose our trust in God, for He can take care of the situations much better than we can and He will.