

The Story of Ark of the Covenant

Love for a Good Plan

I love a good plan. Nothing makes me feel better about an overwhelming task or situation than being able to come up with a realistic plan to bring resolution to my anxiety. Plans help me feel like I do not have to be concerned about chaos, uncertainty, and failure. **Plans bring a sense of order and control to something that feels chaotic and overwhelming.**

Now, for the most part, this isn't a bad thing. Having a plan so that I keep to my monthly budget is not a bad thing it keeps me on track and helps me to live a life of discipline rather than a life of impulse. However let's say my plan allows me to manipulate other people by continuously offering and retracting money in order to get them to accomplish my desired end? What if I use my "budget" as a way of holding money over someone's head? Now my sense of control has gone from a healthy and life giving discipline to a manipulative intimidation technique. My sense of control now becomes something that destroys life, not something that builds life.

A Sense of Control

On some level, we all want to feel like we have our ducks in a row, we all want a sense of control. Wanting to control our life is not inherently bad; it is only when our sense control becomes destructive that we start to run into problems. **A healthy sense of control will always manifest itself as a form of loving discipline with the focus of building someone up. A destructive sense of control will always manifest itself as a form of deceitful manipulation meant to tear someone down.** An example of this would be someone who holds to a strict diet for health living vs. someone who has a destructive eating disorder such as anorexia, bulimia, or gluttony. This reality means that we have to walk a fine line. Every aspect of our life is vulnerable to this tension and that means that we are all capable of using our desire for order to negatively impact our life and the lives of others around us. Yet in spite of this fact, we can still find hope and we can still have healthy discipline that allows us to remove chaos from our life. We just have to know where to look for it.

As we look at our text today, this is the tension we are going to be dealing with. We are going to be observing how the Israelites and the Philistines both abused their relationship to Yahweh in an attempt to manipulate him for their selfish purpose. **This story serves as a stark example of what happens when we move from a place of healthy and disciplined relational engagement to manipulation and relational exploitation.**

A Tale of Two Countries

Over the last three weeks we have been working our way through the text of First Samuel and exploring some of the rich and fascinating stories contained within its pages. We subtitled our series: Stories of Faithfulness and Failure because these themes are constantly apparent throughout the text. Pastor Richard has dissected the stories of faithfulness found in the life of Hannah and the life of the prophet Samuel while Andrew shared with us about the failure of Eli's sons Phinehas and Hophni. **Today we are going to continue this trend by discussing the failure of both the Israelites and Philistines as they attempt to manipulate people and control God for their own purposes.**

Our text from first Samuel provides a somewhat humorous example of the chaos that occurs when we try to control the way we interact with God and with others. The passage read to you this morning was from First Samuel Ch.5 and it details what happens to the Philistines when they try to manipulate Yahweh for their own benefit. It is important to note that the themes we were discussing today aren't just characterized by Philistines in First Samuel five, but also by the Israelites in First Samuel chapters four and six as well. **This text is not just about the failure of the "pagan" Philistines to understand how to relate to God, but also the failure of the "righteous" Israelites to properly interact with God. Let's take it from the beginning.**

'The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. And when the people came to 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 here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies."

1 Samuel 4:2-3 (ESV)

This whole situation started off with a battle. The Israelites and Philistines met on opposite hills and proceeded to battle in a valley below. The battle is a result of the Philistines attempting to conquer what they perceive to be a weaker enemy in Israel. The battle commences and Israel suffers a crushing defeat, in fear for their freedom and way of life they decide to do what they have always done . . . sort of. They genuinely believe the Ark is going to keep them safe and deliver them victory. The only problem with this is that it was never the Ark controlling victory or belief, God was. **In this moment Israel was not responding in faith they were appealing to a genie in a bottle. Instead of appealing to the true power source, they appealed to a meaningless object and it cost them dearly.**

'When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. '

1 Samuel 5:1-2 (ESV)

Following their shocking defeat of Israel and their capture of Israel's beloved Ark, the Philistines returned home victorious and prepared for a victory tour to show off their spoils of war. They bring the Ark to the temple of Dagon their Supreme Being. To them this was the ultimate sign of control; they now controlled Israel because they controlled Israel's God. Philistia was on top of the world, at least until the next morning. Following their victory they awoke the next two mornings to find their statue of Dagon face down before the Ark of the Lord. Now terrified, their fears are only compounded when the people start to be plagued by some nasty boils in any town where they place the Ark. This fear combined with knowledge of what the God of Israel was capable of, led them to return the ark to Israel. **What the Philistines thought they could control and exploit for their own benefit actually created more chaos than they were willing to deal with.**

What we have here is a failure to understand what exactly it means to be involved in a relational covenant with God. The Israelites tried to use him like a genie in a bottle and exploit his power **without any real commitment** and the Philistines thought that because they had the "ark" they could control and exploit him for **their own purpose.** The ignorance of these two countries created two competing scenarios that resulted in chaos from an attempt to control and manipulate. Had the Israelites followed

there relational discipline and understood that the Ark was not God, but actually his representation; they would have authentically Worshipped God and perhaps affected the outcome of the battle. Had the Philistines truly understood the nature of Yahweh, they might have begun to worship him as the one true God instead of thinking they controlled him because they controlled the Ark. **Two examples of manipulation, two examples of Chaos from perceived control.**

Organizing Your Box

Our story today has shown us that both **Christians** and **non-Christians** are capable of manipulation and destructive levels of control in our relationships. They also show us that this path ultimately leads to **chaos**, the very thing we were trying to avoid. That being said, how do we identify the right way to apply the sense of order we seek in our life? It's all about how we organize the box. Typically we like to divide our lives into blocks that represent the areas of our life we value most. Most of us probably have a block for our marriage or relationship, a block for our children, a block for extended family, a block for our job, a block for our budget, a block for our politics, a block for our health, and maybe a block for God. These blocks to represent areas of influence in our life, areas where we seek to experience a sense of control and order. For many of us what tends to happen is we fill our box and fill our box until we run out of space and then we simply take the easiest thing and put it off to the side. **All too often what ends up happening is we remove God from our box.** We stop going to worship, we quit reading our bible, we forget to pray, we stop thinking about others, we quit being generous, and before we know it we're our relationship with God becomes an afterthought. We have in a sense reduced him to a genie in a bottle that we call upon when the life we have built for ourselves spirals into chaos. The unfortunate thing is, when this happens you have probably already started manipulating the people around you in order to maintain a sense of control. **You have probably stopped loving people and started using people.** You have become the very thing you wanted to avoid.

So, How are you organizing your box? You want to maintain some order in your life? Maybe it's time to stop trying to create your own sense of control and let God do it for you. Throughout this message I've talked about how a healthy sense of control allows you to insert life building disciplines into your life. Well, the easiest way to do that is stop pushing God out of your box and start putting him on top of your box because he was always too big to fit in your box anyway. I'm not sure where your life is at this morning; maybe it's the best it's ever been or maybe it's spiraling out of control and you just ready to be done. You are done trying to parent your kids, you are done trying to love your wife, you are done abusing your body by eating cheeseburgers for lunch 7 days a week and maybe you are done with not having enough money at the end of the month. Somehow, some way you are ready to stop trying to manipulate your way through life. You are tired of the selfishness, you are tired of the chaos, and you are tired of not making God a priority in your life. Whatever the case may be for you this morning, I have word for you, we actually three words. Recognize, Repent, Respond.

Recognize – See the ability God has to impact your life

Repent – Remove the things that are keeping God from impacting your life

Respond – Embrace some Godly disciplines in your life

On the back of your handout today you will find a bible verse at the top followed by five days of the week. If you recognize the impact God can have on your life, you're ready to repent and remove the things that are keeping God from impacting your life, and you're ready to respond by embracing some Godly disciplines in your life then here is my challenge for you this week. On Monday through Friday of this week look for one way to Love God and one way to Love your neighbor because that is what this

boils down too, being intentional about loving God and loving others . Pray this verse each day and see what happens. I think you'll be surprised what can happen when you allow God to motivate your actions towards him and other people.

Moving from Manipulation to Hope

When we stop trying to control things and manipulate our way through life, God opens up the door for a whole new list of amazing possibilities. We all could use a little hope in our lives and hope comes when think about what could be. What if we all stopped trying to control and manipulate our relationship with God? What kind of church would we be if our comfort zone was not about us, but about helping any and every one find a way to serve and worship God? What kind of church could we be if we willing set aside our own preferences and allowed God to freely work in this place? What if we stopped treating God like our little genie in a bottle and started submitting to him like the King he really is? I'm telling you guys the possibilities are there, God desperately wants to do a great work in our personal lives and he desperately wants to continue doing great work through our church. We just have to stop trying to control the outcome and stop pushing God out of our life. If we can do that, the impact we can have, the impact this church can have will be amazing.