

The Amazing Story of The Lost Ark
Message 3 of 5 in the series: "Stories to Make Us Bold!"

A. The Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines when the Israelite army carried it into battle in a foolish attempt to manipulate God.

"At that time Israel was at war with the Philistines... The Philistines attacked and defeated the army of Israel, killing 4,000 men. After the battle was over, the troops retreated to their camp, and the elders of Israel asked, 'Why did the Lord allow us to be defeated by the Philistines?' Then they said, 'Let's bring the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord from Shiloh. If we carry it into battle with us, **it will save us from our enemies.**' So they sent men to Shiloh to bring the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of Heaven's Armies, who is enthroned between the cherubim... **When all the Israelites saw the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord coming into the camp, their shout of joy was so loud it made the ground shake!** 'What's going on?' the Philistines asked. 'What's all the shouting about in the Hebrew camp?' When they were told it was because the Ark of the Lord had arrived, they panicked. 'The gods have come into their camp!' they cried... They are the same gods who destroyed the Egyptians with plagues when Israel was in the wilderness. Fight as never before, Philistines!...' So the Philistines fought desperately, and Israel was defeated again. The slaughter was great; 30,000 Israelite soldiers died that day. The survivors turned and fled to their tents. The Ark of God was captured..." 1 Samuel 4:1-11 (NLT)

Note: The Israelites' loud celebration was meaningless because their faith was misplaced. They trusted in the Ark, not God, to save them. "Don't be fooled into thinking that you will never suffer because the Temple is here. It's a lie! Do you really think you can steal, murder, commit adultery, lie, and burn incense to Baal and all those other new gods of yours, and then come here and stand before me in my Temple and chant, 'We are safe!'—only to go right back to all those evils again?" Jeremiah 7:8-10 (NLT)

Life Application: God wants us to humble ourselves and seek Him instead of trying to use Him to get what we want. "...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land." 2 Chronicles 7:14 (NIV)

B. After their victory over the Israelites, the Philistines foolishly placed the Ark in the temple of their god, Dagon, in order to display Dagon's superiority, but it didn't work out like they planned.

"After the Philistines captured the Ark of God, they took it from the battleground at Ebenezer to the town of Ashdod. They carried the Ark of God into the temple of Dagon and placed it beside an idol of Dagon. But when the citizens of Ashdod went to see it the next morning, Dagon had fallen with his face to the ground in front of the Ark of the Lord! So they took Dagon and put him in his place again. But the next morning the same thing happened—Dagon had fallen face down before the Ark of the Lord again. This time his head and hands had broken off and were lying in the doorway. Only the trunk of his body was left intact. That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor anyone who enters the temple of Dagon in Ashdod will step on its threshold." 1 Samuel 5:1-5 (NLT)

Note: It is foolish to place our faith/confidence in things that cannot even take care of themselves. "Their ways are futile and foolish. They cut down a tree, and a craftsman carves an idol. They decorate it with gold and silver and then fasten it securely with hammer and nails so it won't fall over. Their gods are like helpless scarecrows in a cucumber field! They cannot speak, and they need to be carried because they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of such gods, for they can neither harm you nor do you any good." Jeremiah 10:3-5 (NLT)

Life Application: We must boldly place our faith in God Almighty who keeps us from stumbling. "**To him who is able to keep you from stumbling** and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen." Jude 1:24-25 (NIV)

"Teach those who are rich in this world **not to be proud and not to trust in their money**, which is so unreliable. **Their trust should be in God**, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment."

1 Timothy 6:17 (NLT)

C. Through a terrible plague, God proved to the Philistines that He is the one true God.

"Then the Lord's heavy hand struck the people of Ashdod and the nearby villages with a plague of tumors. When the people realized what was happening, they cried out, 'We can't keep the Ark of the God of Israel

here any longer! He is against us! We will all be destroyed along with Dagon, our god.' So they called together the rulers of the Philistine towns and asked, 'What should we do with the Ark of the God of Israel?' The rulers discussed it and replied, '**Move it to the town of Gath.**' So they moved the Ark of the God of Israel to Gath. But when the Ark arrived at Gath, the Lord's heavy hand fell on its men, young and old; he struck them with a plague of tumors, and there was a great panic. So they sent the Ark of God to the town of Ekron, but when the people of Ekron saw it coming they cried out, 'They are bringing the Ark of the God of Israel here to kill us, too!' The people summoned the Philistine rulers again and begged them, 'Please send the Ark of the God of Israel back to its own country, or it will kill us all.' For the deadly plague from God had already begun, and great fear was sweeping across the town. Those who didn't die were afflicted with tumors; and the cry from the town rose to heaven." 1 Samuel 5:6-12 (NLT)

Note: The Philistines were reluctant to give up their prized trophy, so they moved the Ark to places they hoped were outside of God's jurisdiction. "The Israelite gods are gods of the hills; that is why they won. But we can beat them easily on the plains." 1 Kings 20:23b (NLT)

Life Application: We can boldly go to God anytime/anywhere because there is no place outside of His control. "**I can never escape from your Spirit!** I can never get away from your presence! If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I go down to the grave, you are there. If I ride the wings of the morning, if I dwell by the farthest oceans, even there your hand will guide me, and your strength will support me." Psalm 139:7-10 (NLT)

D. After seven months of suffering, the Philistines finally decided to give the Ark back.

"The Ark of the Lord remained in Philistine territory seven months in all. Then the Philistines called in their priests and diviners and asked them, 'What should we do about the Ark of the Lord? Tell us how to return it to its own country.' 'Send the Ark of the God of Israel back with a gift,' they were told. 'Send a guilt offering so the plague will stop. Then, if you are healed, you will know it was his hand that caused the plague.' 'What sort of guilt offering should we send?' they asked. And they were told, 'Since the plague has struck both you and your five rulers, make five gold tumors and five gold rats, just like those that have ravaged your land. Make these things to show honor to the God of Israel. Perhaps then he will stop afflicting you, your gods, and your land. **Don't be stubborn and rebellious as Pharaoh and the Egyptians were. By the time God was finished with them, they were eager to let Israel go.** Now build a new cart, and find two cows that have just given birth to calves. Make sure the cows have never been yoked to a cart. Hitch the cows to the cart, but shut their calves away from them in a pen. Put the Ark of the Lord on the cart, and beside it place a chest containing the gold rats and gold tumors you are sending as a guilt offering. Then let the cows go wherever they want. If they cross the border of our land and go to Beth-Shemesh, we will know it was the Lord who brought this great disaster upon us. If they don't, we will know it was not his hand that caused the plague. It came simply by chance.' ...And sure enough, without veering off in other directions, the cows went straight along the road toward Beth-Shemesh, lowing as they went..."

1 Samuel 6:1-12a (NLT)

Note: Sadly, even though the Philistines recognized God's awesome power, they were unwilling to turn from their idolatry and change their wicked ways. Instead of worshiping God, they sent the Ark away.

Life Application: We must not harden our hearts when we realize what God wants us to do. "Today when you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts as Israel did when they rebelled..." Hebrews 3:7b-8a (NLT)

John Schmidt • 09-03-23 • john@centeringlives.com

Connect Group Questions:

Read the amazing story of the Lost Ark. (1 Samuel 4-6) Then discuss the following questions:

1. Have you ever been superstitious about something (lucky t-shirt, avoiding black cats/#13, etc.)? Why is superstition contrary to living a life of faith in Jesus?
2. What do the following Scripture passages say about the foolishness of putting faith/trust in idols?
 - Psalm 135:15-18
 - Isaiah 46:5-7
 - Jeremiah 10:3-5

3. Why did the Apostle Paul say greed is a form of idolatry? (Ephesians 5:5) Why do Jesus and Paul warn us against trusting in money rather than God? (Matthew 6:24, 1 Timothy 6:17)
4. Why do you think the Philistines chose to send the Ark back to the Israelites without choosing to worship the God of the Israelites who had miraculously proven to them that He is real? Why do many people today choose to reject God even though they can see He has miraculously changed the life of a friend/relative?
5. How should we respond when God clearly reveals to us that we need to repent/take a step of faith? (Proverbs 3:5-6, Hebrews 3:8)
6. Discuss the following statements:
 - The Philistines chose to trust an idol they had to pick up when it fell over rather than place their faith in the Living God who keeps us from falling. (1 Samuel 5:1-5, Jude 1:24-25)
 - The Philistines attempted to move the Ark to places they hoped were outside of God's jurisdiction, but there are no places outside of God's jurisdiction. (1 Samuel 5:6-12, Psalm 139:7-10)
7. Spend some time praying as a group. Ask God to help us boldly trust Him and not ourselves or our money or anything else.
8. Discuss the following quotations:

"When anything in life is an absolute requirement for your happiness and self-worth, it is essentially an 'idol,' something you are actually worshiping. When such a thing is threatened, your anger is absolute. Your anger is the way the idol keeps you in its service, in its chains." Tim Keller

"Every one of us is, even from his mother's womb, a master craftsman of idols." John Calvin

"You don't have to go to heathen lands today to find false gods. America is full of them. Whatever you love more than God is your idol." D.L. Moody