

# 1 Samuel 4:12-22

Intro God's Glory Days May 25, 2008

Nostalgia ain't what it used to be. No longer the curmudgeon's domain, longing for the good old days now plagues young and old alike. Of all places, the internet is the place to go to reminisce about the simpler times of decades past, such as the nineties pop culture was ruled by Beanie Babies, Spice Girls and Seinfeld, when dot-com was where to make money and another Clinton was in the news. The love of the past is seen in commercials that now hype the supposedly serene times of the sixties, such as Total Cereal's hawking whole-wheat flakes with a Peter Max animation and Dennis Hopper pushing not dope, but Ameriprise Financial. Ads filled with images like Volkswagen buses festooned with groovy graffiti, daisies, peace signs, psychedelic drawings in DayGlo colors and hair, long beautiful hair, shining, gleaming, streaming, flaxen, waxen...<sup>1</sup> It leaves me wondering if somehow a national drug-induced stupor has caused us to forget race riots, Vietnam and the breakdown of all cultural norms.

When it comes to the good old days, libertarian humorist P.J. O'Rourke said: "When you think of the good old days, think dentistry." That's enough to set anyone straight as to whether the good old days were as good as we'd like to think. Turn the clock back a hundred years and you'd find life expectancy was 47, 14% of homes had bathtubs, 8% had phones. Ford's Model T went into production October of '08 and GM was just getting started, but there were some 200,000 cars on the roads at that time. The cost of a new car? \$5000. The average worker took in \$400/year.

For that reason it has been quipped that nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory.

Another name for the good old days are glory days. If you are old enough to know who Bruce Springsteen is, he sang about them back in '84, as he reminisces with old friends and concludes:

Think I'm going down to the well tonight and I'm going to drink till I get my fill  
And I hope when I get old I don't sit around thinking about it but I probably will  
Yeah, just sitting back trying to recapture a little of the glory of,  
but time slips away and leaves you with nothing mister but boring stories of glory days  
Glory days well they'll pass you by  
Glory days in the wink of a young girl's eye  
Glory days, glory days

Far too often the good old days, the glory days, celebrate the best of the past while holding the present in suspicion. Such thinking reveals a faulty understanding of where we find glory, of what good really is. That same misunderstanding of glory days is found in our passage where we are introduced to a time in which the glory certainly appeared to have faded. READ 1 Samuel 4:12-22

There are few more depressing passages in all of Scripture. It is easy to read this and want to slump down in the pew and wait for the Paxil to kick in. What worse thing could happen? Phinehas' wife appears to well capture the sentiment of the day when, with her dying breath she names her newborn son, Ichabod, which can be taken to be a rhetorical question: "Where is the glory?" The glory had gone out of Israel. The picture looks bleak...but is it?

Let's review what happened in Israel.

This is the time of the Judges, when every man did what was right in his own eyes, some 3000 years ago. While Israel settled in the Promised Land, the land flowed not with milk and honey, but the blood of God's people as a constant steam of enemies tormented them.

There is a bright spot in the opening chapters for a boy was dedicated by his mother to serve in the temple named Samuel. While God called the lad as a prophet, there was trouble in the land.

The Philistines, recent immigrants from the Greek isles, settled along the southern coast of Israel. Their advanced technologies positioned them to control the region. When the battle lines are drawn in chapter 4 it is no surprise that 4000 Jewish men and boys lay dead on the field. When the elders of Israel recognize that such a defeat is from God, the Ark is brought out to the cheers of God's people and the fears of the Philistines. But the presence of the Ark is not enough for the tables to be turned, for the Israelites faith in a gold box was insufficient to turn the tide and the body count rose at the next conflagration. On that day Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas were killed. Worse still; the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant.

It is then that we come to our dismal passage where we quickly concede the point that the glory is gone. Eli, now aged, is sitting at the city gate, having sent out the Ark from the Temple. He knows the prophecy against his two sons; they would both die on the same day. But his heart trembles not for them, but the Ark. The picture is more bleak as we are told he is sitting by the road watching (13) only to be told in v15 that he is blind. He sits, waiting, wondering. Listening. What he hears next unnerves him.

No doubt he heard the pounding of the soldier's feet as he raced past him at the gate, panting having just run the 20 miles from the battlefield. But the messenger, whose appearance speaks of the tragedy that has befallen Israel, goes unnoticed by blind Eli. The runner, whose clothes torn and head covered in dirt, a sign of mourning, goes into the city to deliver the terrifying news.

As the news is reported a cry ascends from Shiloh. The Ark is gone. That which Israel had hoped would save them is no longer theirs to claim. As the people bemoan the loss, Eli seeks the reason for the howl. The man comes to the aged priest, too blind to see, but quick enough to know something is wrong.

In v16 the man's description slowly unfolds the tragedy. He came from the battle; he fled from the battle that very day and made the 20-mile trek. Eli presses for details. Again the answers come slowly. Israel was routed; the slaughter horrendous. Both sons are dead... and the ark is captured.

The writer tells us that it is this news, the Ark's capture that finally breaks the old man.

Perched on his seat by the gate, Eli falls backwards, snapping his neck and dies. We are reminded that he was old (v15 said 98), he was heavy (no doubt the pleasurable meat his sons procured for him had their effect) and, that he judged Israel for 40 years.

Given what comes next and the descriptive terms used here, there's a play on words. Eli was heavy, literally, *kabod*, weighty, honored, the word is glory. Eli was honored, holding a seat in the city gate, having judged Israel for 40 years, the chief priest in Shiloh. But he was also a burden, weighing Israel down with his sin and that of his sons. His excessive poundage is a physical reminder to the twisted glory of this self-indulgent priest.

With Eli dead the scene shifts to his daughter-in-law. Phinehas' wife was pregnant and when the news came to her that the ark was captured, her father-in-law and husband were now dead, her contractions begin.

With descriptive detail, she bows down, but the agony is too much. In the midst labor it appears she is dying. Those nursing her through labor seek to comfort her as she dies. Her efforts are not in vain, for she has a son. The line will continue, an important factor for an Israelite. But the news of the child issues no response other than to name the child... *Ichabod*

She explains the choice of the name, which means *no glory* or *where is the glory* summing up the events of that tragic day: "the glory has departed from Israel" or better still – the glory is in exile.

The reasons seem clear enough. Phinehas is dead as is Eli. But she clarifies the reason; it is because the Ark of the Covenant has been captured. For that reason, God's glory is gone. The glory days are in the past.

Had the glory of God truly departed?

If we wish to say that God's glory was gone, it went when Israel and her leaders refused to repent of their sins, when they thought they could manipulate God to do their bidding with God in a box. If this is so, then it is best to say that the glory of God departed, but not because the ark of God had been captured. Rather say the ark had been captured because the glory had already departed.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, I am left uneasy to conclude from what I know of God's character from Scripture, what we see in the coming chapters and throughout God's Word to too quickly agree with her final words. It is tempting to breath a heavy sigh, bemoaning the effects of sin that God's glory departs when God's people disobey. Certainly that is true. But I am not sure that this is the point of the passage.

I am uneasy allowing Mrs. Phinehas declare the nature of God's glory. Her pronouncement assumes the faulty assumptions we investigated last week, as Israel thought they possessed the power of God because they had God in the box. I'm not sure God's glory was perfectly present up to this point and merely because the Philistines took the Ark that God's glory now retreated from God's people.

This is certainly a dark time, a time in which God's providence is hard to discern. With the loss of the ark, the death of 34,000 men in battle, the demise of the aged priest and his two sons, as well as an orphaned child, certainly adds to the conclusion that God has checked out.

But as we continue reading 1 Samuel we see that God is far from finished with His people. Sinful and wretched as they may be, God has not given up hope nor should the reader.

We must not forget that up to this point the Ark of the Covenant, housed in the tabernacle in Shiloh, overseen by a corrupt priesthood, headed by the perpetually imprudent Eli. His sons took their father's shallowness to a new level, as they stole meat meant for sacrifice and stole women meant for temple service. They rejected their father's feeble correction. It is clear they had to go and God would see to it that all understood His day of reckoning had come. There is a bright spot in the young boy, Samuel. But what preceded the capture of the ark was not a time to elicit nostalgia. The glory days are not in the past, but are still to come.

We must ask some important questions if Mrs. Phinehas' dying words are to be taken as fact. Has God's glory departed? What is to become of young Samuel? Is God really confined to the Ark so that, under Philistine control, God is impotent to act? Read ahead and you'll see that Eli is not the only one who falls over powerless before the God of the Universe. We must get a handle on this important concept of God's glory.

What is the glory of God?<sup>3</sup>

The original meaning of glory has to do with weightiness. So to speak of God's glory refers to the seriousness, his perfection, the infinite significance of all of the attributes of God. It sums up who He is.

What does it mean then for us to glorify God?

We cannot add to His glory, for He is already perfectly and infinitely glorious. Rather, for us to glorify God means we acknowledge the weight of his honor in our worship, in our lives. To consider God's glory is to recoil at the thought of distracting from what is due to Him, to turn the gaze of attention from His character to our own accomplishments.

A quick survey of God's glory through Scriptures shows us this central concept.

We read from Exodus 33 where Moses desired to see God's glory, something that no created being could expect to see and live. God revealed this glory to Moses, announcing His character... listen again to that description from Exodus 34

"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

God's glory is known by his mercy, his grace, forgiveness as well as his justice.

Certainly the greatest tragedy for any person or church is to have God's glory go into exile, for God's presence to be removed. But God's glory does not succumb to the power of our sin, but our sin is ultimately destroyed by His glory...when we find it our supreme joy to turn from our sin and claim His grace as only sufficient for our lives.

This same pattern is seen in another famous passage revealing God's glory, Isaiah 6.

The prophet Isaiah has a vision in which he sees the Lord seated on his throne in the temple. What was pictured by the Ark and in the tabernacle is here revealed more fully. The angels call to one another that famed refrain of God threefold holiness...

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

Don't miss that important point. What Isaiah only saw in his vision is revealed to always be the case; the whole earth is full of God's glory. Isaiah will, upon understanding this to be true, falls in a heap, seeing his own sin and the sin of his people.

God's glory may be obscured by our sin, but it is never sent away. What is more, as we have a greater appreciation of the weight of God's character, the full import of who He is, we have no other option but to worship, confessing our sins and our need of a Savior.

Paul likewise sees the glory of God in the context of where God is most glorified.

For Paul God's glory is seen in the work of Christ on our behalf. Turn to Ephesians 1, for there we see the refrain repeated of God's glory as the summa bona of God's decree. In this great pronouncement of God's plan of redemption, we see the reason why God did all of this. (read 1:3-14). Throughout the Scriptures we see how God is glorified by the praise that comes in our being purchased by Christ.

Turning back to 1 Samuel, we see that God's people trampled God's glory in their sinfulness, but also in their refusal to repent. To conclude that God's glory sulks away when we sin, as though the weight of God's majesty must succumb to the burden of our sin, is a warped view of God.

What is more, when we neglect to see that God's glory is most supremely seen in His forgiveness of my sin, we adopt a deadly lifestyle. If we imagine that God is most glorified in my accomplishments and presenting an image of my perfection we diminish His glory, for we promote a lie. We imagine that God is glorified when my failures are whitewashed, when I deny my sinfulness and pretend that sin is far from me.

This is a good old days approach of Christian living, a glory days version that Mrs. Phinehas professed with her dying breath. That God's glory resides with us when we play the religious game, when all seems well, while we have God in the box in our possession despite our profaning His commands.

This dangerous view of God's glory days allows us to believe that God is most glorified when I am most at ease. That God's glory is in direct proportion to my comfort. That when sin bubbles to the surface God's glory dissipates; therefore, the best thing I can do is to suppress sin, rather than deal with it at the foot of the cross of Christ.

When we do that we imagine that the glory days of the past are what God would have me recapture today. Those halcyon days of yore when kids minded their parents, when divorce was rare and couples were lovingly devoted to each other. I can paint a pretty picture of the past when culture felt more Christian so that a glance at today's world must cause me to conclude that God's glory is gone. What a tragic mistake to make.

**These are the glory days for God.** These are the good times in which we have the supreme opportunity to see God's grace make itself known in our midst, to feel the wave of his pleasure upon us as his people not because we have somehow convinced ourselves that we have sufficiently cleaned ourselves up enough to be presentable before God.

Rather, we have a message that God's glory is not in exile. God's grace is not a distant memory of a by-gone era. The best of times is now, for this is the year of God's favor, this is when the power of the cross tramples sin. Forgiveness is ours, for Christ has risen. The tomb stands empty. God is glorified as we announce His grace to a lost and dying world.

As God's glory should be our supreme passion we must speak of his forgiveness in our own lives, we should be quick to see as did Moses God's glory found in his mercy. We should be like Isaiah that as the whole earth is full of God's glory we know we have nowhere to hide, yet Christ has made us His own and we stand forgiven.

When we feel the burden of our sin, don't imagine God's glory gone from our lives, rather feel the weight of our sin slowly killing us like Eli or Phinehas' wife, let us see in God's glory the opportunity to find his mercy and grace, so that we can be used by God to honor him. That he can take a sinful life like mine and make it count for his glory.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/10/business/media/10adcol.html> The 60's as the Good Old Days, Stuart Elliot, 12/10./07

<sup>2</sup> From H.L. Ellison, Scripture Union Bible Study Books: Joshua-2 Samuel, 1966, p51, quoted by Dale Ralph Davis, 1 Samuel, Looking on the Heart, p57.

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<sup>3</sup> Much of this was taken from an article *The Glory of God: Our Supreme Passion*, published in the Founders Journal · Fall 2000 · pp. 21-22, found at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/journal/fj42/article3.html>