

### “The Lord Thundered!”

Pious folk often look down their noses at those of us who fail at times in our Christian walk. They ask how it is possible for one who has been saved by grace to fall away and sin? Well, I will leave them to their pseudo-holiness, for even Paul admitted to failing on occasions. In this chapter we see how the whole nation of Israel fell to the lies of Satan, to follow after false gods. If the whole of God’s chosen nation can thus fail, so soon after being given the Middle East for their home, then *maybe* one or two of us can sometimes fail as Christians!

We now read of the long period between getting back the Ark from the Philistines and God returning to the people in an active sense. Forgetting what God had done time and again for them in the past, the people of Israel slid back into the stupid worship of false gods. We are all capable of sliding into sin of all kinds, and none of us is free of the penchant for evil. Let us not look down our noses at Christians who sin, or who appear to slide down into a pit of falsity. Each of us is more than capable of doing the same thing when we forget God. And Satan is there, by our sides, ready and waiting to find the tiniest chink in our armour so he can urge us onwards in sin.

Samuel had to wait for over 20 years, watching his nation foul its own nest with false gods, until it was God’s time to bring the people back to sanity. And when He did, it was with a spectacle. He roared with thunder and enemies scattered! We have a mighty Lord whose arm is always stretched out to gather us up. We also have a God Whose wrath can be aimed like a thunderbolt at those who fall away into sin. Let us beware, then, and walk the path of righteousness, lest we also fall and incur His wrath. God might tolerate your sin right now, but He might also come upon you with great anger tomorrow, even for the same sin. Do not, then, be a fool.

#### Verse 1

1.

“And the men of Kirjathjearim came, and fetched up the ark of the Lord, and brought it into the house of Abinadab in the hill, and sanctified Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the Lord.”

And so the Ark was again on the move, this time to Kirjathjearim (‘city of forests’, far north of Judah). In the wrong hands, the Ark was a source of doom and death. This is what it is like, too,

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when scriptures are in the hands of the wrong men. Today there are countless false preachers and teachers. Many of them are in reformed churches, occupying pulpits they have no right to occupy. They *chose themselves* to be preachers – *God* did not choose them to preach! Their churches will be sterile and lacking in life, though their members might be saved. Indeed, the pastor or preacher himself might be saved – but because he has never been called to be a pastor or preacher by God, his task is fruitless and dead. It was such a preacher who caused a number of us to finally leave the ‘established’ church system.

Of course, cult churches, such as the charismatic meeting places, are full to the brim of these false leaders of men. They follow their own agenda, denying God the glory and leading their members into spiritual insolvency. The men of Bethshemesh, by an act of curiosity and forgetfulness, brought down death from God upon themselves. How much so will His wrath be against men who abuse God’s word and lead the people into error? It would appear that charismatic teachers are more than happy in their heresies, for now. But, a day will come when they will review their own foolishness with terror as God declares them vile sinners worthy of death.

The Ark was carried, no doubt very carefully indeed, into the house of Abinadab (‘my father is noble’ or ‘my father is willing’), sited on top of a hill. We do not know why his house was chosen. He, or the elders, set apart (sanctified) or dedicated, his son, Eleazar (‘God has helped’) to guard and protect the Ark.

### Verses 2-6

1.

“And it came to pass, while the ark abode in Kirjathjearim, that the time was long; for it was twenty years: and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.

2.

And Samuel spake unto all the house of Israel, saying, If ye do return unto the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the Lord, and serve him only: and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.”

3.

Then the children of Israel did put away Baalim and Ashtaroth, and served the Lord only.

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4.

And Samuel said, Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you unto the Lord.

5.

And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the Lord, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the Lord. And Samuel judged the children of Israel in Mizpeh.”

Eleazar had almost a lifetime's work as the Ark's guard, for it stayed at Kirjathjearim for 20 years. During that time all of Israel grieved and mourned that the abode of God was languishing in an ordinary house and not in the Temple. Of course, 20 years is a long time in human terms, but to God it was less than a blink of an eye, for He lives in eternity. There was a distinct gall in this mourning, for it is apparent from Samuel's words that the people were double-minded, for they worshipped other gods whilst wailing after the true God's Ark!

Eventually, God once again spoke to the people through Samuel. He told them that if they threw out their 'strange' gods – foreign, alien, vain gods - and Ashtaroth ('star') the fertility goddess of Canaan, and Baalim (or Baal, 'lord', chief god of the Canaanites as well as the Phoenicians), then He would deliver them from their enemies. From the text we can see that in the 20 years of the Ark's isolation, the Hebrews were harassed by the Philistines. Graciously, God promised to give the Hebrews victory if they turned back to Him in their 'hearts'... in sincerity and truth. This is true mercy, for who else would forgive a whole people that had turned their back on him? However, the people were ready to rely only in the One True God, so they threw out all their false gods and turned back to Jehovah.

Samuel then commanded all the nation to gather at Mizpeh ('watchtower') in the north, probably in Benjamite territory at a place customarily used for large meetings, so that he could pray for them as a people. When they were gathered together, water (symbolic of both danger and refreshment) was collected and poured out (symbolic of the heart) in the presence of God and they fasted for the day. Then they prayed in earnest, admitting they had sinned against God.

With stern relief, Samuel 'judged' the people, as their civil and religious leader. The word can

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mean either condemnation and punishment, or vindication. On this occasion, God led him to judge in the people's favour, to indicate that He had heard their pleas and repentance, and had forgiven them. They were fortunate indeed!

You will note that a mere man, Samuel, judged the people. It is often claimed that we must not judge others. This single episode alone is enough to dispel that myth. The New Testament *commands* us to judge our fellows, so we cannot opt-out of this task.

We do not have the same mammoth task as Samuel, of course, but the principle of judging is the same and it is the Christian who does not judge who is sinning, not the one who judges. Sadly, Christians who judge scripturally are often castigated by their fellows, but this shows the ignorance of the critics.

### Verses 7-11

1.

“And when the Philistines heard that the children of Israel were gathered to Mizpeh, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the children of Israel heard it. They were afraid of the Philistines.

2.

And the children of Israel said to Samuel, Cease not to cry unto the Lord our God for us, that he will save us out of the hand of the Philistines.

3.

And Samuel took a sucking lamb, and offered it for a burnt offering wholly unto the Lord: and Samuel cried unto the Lord for Israel; and the Lord heard him.

4.

And as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel: but the Lord thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited them; and they were smitten before Israel.

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5.

And the men of Israel went out of Mizpeh, and pursued the Philistines, and smote them, until they came under Bethcar.”

Mizpeh was very close to the Philistine border and, anyway, northern Judah was considered to be annexed to the enemy. So, when the people of Israel massed in one place, the Philistines must have thought they were planning to do battle against them. The Philistine war lords promptly gathered together their armies and marched toward Mizpeh. Word got back to the Israelites that their enemy was again on the march in great force and, once again (a fairly regular occurrence!), the Israelites were scared witless. It is a fact that Christians are scared witless of their enemies, whenever they look and live away from God. Their spiritual legs buckle as they dwell on the might of their enemy instead of on the greatness and power of God! When they live righteously, though, such fear is rarely found, for the might of God is indwelling, casting out all anxiety.

The people fled to Samuel and begged him to call on God to help them. Yet, just a short while beforehand, God had already promised He would give them victory over their foes! Just like modern Christians, the Israelites looked to themselves and not to God. The Apostles took their eyes off Jesus during a storm and believed they would drown. Once Jesus rebuked them for their unbelief, they calmed down, probably with some shame, and the terrors of the sea were completely removed.

As Samuel prepared a sacrifice of a lamb, which was offered up whole as a burnt offering, the Israelites stood around nervously, as the Philistines came within range, and Samuel called upon God to help them. Samuel unhurriedly pleaded with God to save them and the enemy came closer, ready to attack. Then, God spoke and we have the magnificent words: **“the LORD thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines”!**

This can either mean He caused thunder to sound around them, or that His wrath was as powerful as thunder. Either way (though both applied), He caused them to quake with fear. It is likely that His action did include actual thunder and it was ‘great’ – very intense, powerful and magnified. That there was probably

*actual*

thunder is found in the word for ‘thunder’,

**qowl**

, meaning a very loud voice or sound/to call aloud. (Thunder symbolically being God’s own voice).

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The thunder 'discomfited' the enemy – it drove them to distraction, to such an extent that the whole army stumbled and was struck down by the Israelites. As the enemy ran off in fear, the now empowered Israelites chased after them, through the valley and over the rocky plain and hillsides until they came to the foot of the hill of Bethcar ('house of the ram' or 'place of the lamb'), a Philistine town on the edge of Judah's land probably set on a hill.

### Verses 12-17

1.

"Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.

2.

So the Philistines were subdued, and they came no more into the coast of Israel: and the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel.

3.

And the cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron even unto Gath; and the coasts thereof did Israel deliver out of the hands of the Philistines. And there was peace between Israel and the Amorites.

4.

And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life.

5.

And he went from year to year in circuit to Bethel, and Gilgal, and Mizpeh, and judged Israel in all those places.

6.

And his return was to Ramah; for there was his house; and there he judged Israel; and there he built an altar unto the Lord."

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Samuel, in typical Hebrew fashion, then marked the place of victory with a huge stone, set between Mizpeh and Shen ('crag') nearby. Also typically, the memorial stone was given a name, a name seen over the entrances to many churches today – Ebenezer, 'stone of help' or 'The LORD helped us'.

The Philistines were 'subdued' or humbled and brought low, not doing battle against Israel for a very long time afterward, until Samuel died. Cities once held by the enemy were taken back stretching from Ekron in the Judah lowlands to Gath, Goliath's birthplace. Both were chief cities of the Philistines. The coastline and its habitations were also taken from the enemy so the victory was consolidated. We are told there was peace between the Israelites and the Amorites, who were on the east of Canaan over the River Jordan. No doubt they looked at what Israel did against the Philistines and the land they took back, and thought better of taking them on in battle. It was better than losing everything! We could take back spiritual territory from our enemies if we similarly believed and dedicated ourselves to the Lord. Our lack of success proves our poor spiritual condition.

From that great day, when God delivered Israel from their enemy, Samuel judged the country with renewed power. He was still their civil and religious ruler and now God was restored in their eyes and in their hearts, Samuel was able to act as he wanted to, as the envoy of Jehovah. Consequently, the people reaped God's blessings as they once more followed Him.

Today, court judges move around the country 'in circuit'. Samuel did the same thing, staying in city after city, dispensing God's judgements and listening to cases brought by disgruntled inhabitants. He literally 'lived out of a suitcase', but always returned to his own city of Ramah, 5 miles from Jerusalem, where he sat as judge in the gateway, and where he built an altar to Almighty God.

Those days were good and prosperous. God rarely promises wealth to individuals, but when whole countries follow the Lord, He gives them an abundance of everything, so the population benefits as a result. The UK and the USA were examples of this wealth and success, when they followed the Lord.

We have today lost such national blessings, as we sink to the gutter, making laws to protect and propagate evils condemned by God, and by acting against His laws and people. In such times

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God will instead bless those who uphold His laws, such as individual local churches (and thereby those who are members). It can be said that in the second millennium, the west is suffering for the sins of its rulers and governments, with far worse to come as laws and social actions support the worst of sins in its midst, calling them 'good'.

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