

SPIRITUAL TECHNOLOGY

1 Samuel 4 (NASB)

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1. GRABBING A SPIRITUAL TECHNOLOGY

What do you grab when you are in desperate trouble and you need help? What do we grab for help when we see some area of the church which needs strengthening? An episode from the history of Israel during the days of the prophet Samuel tells us about the need to grab the right thing in the right way: **"Thus the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle and camped beside Ebenezer while the Philistines camped in Aphek. The Philistines drew up in battle array to meet Israel. When the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines who killed about four thousand men on the battlefield. When the people came into the camp, the elders of Israel said, 'Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us take to ourselves from Shiloh the ark of the covenant of the LORD, that it may come among us and deliver us from the power of our enemies.'** So the people sent to Shiloh, and from there they carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts who sits above the cherubim; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. As the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth resounded" (1 Samuel 4:1-5).

The Philistines were attacking Israel after a long period of leaving the nation alone. The attackers were soldiers outfitted in battle gear while the defenders could not have been anything other than a mob of untrained men with no clear command structure. Four thousand Israelite men lost their lives in the first battle which motivated the elders of the nation to cry out: **"Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines?"** We might cry out: Why is our church not growing? Why are many of our children not following the Lord? Why won't Christians read their own Bibles? Why do the majority of Christian men use pornography, and a substantial portion of Christian women? Why can't we convince our nation that killing babies is wrong?

I am fascinated by the fact that the elders of Israel cried out the correct question and then did nothing to answer it. They neither offered a prayer nor consulted the priests. Instead, they grabbed the ark of God as an instrument of spiritual technology. This wondrous gold-covered box with angels poised atop was the God-ordained location of his presence with Israel. It was the holiest article in the land and had gone into battle before, but only upon God's explicit guidance.

This was wrong on many levels. First, the elders of Israel did not have charge of the ark, the priests did. This is a form of spiritual chaos not likely to produce a good result. When we leave our place in God's kingdom and presume to act in a place ordained for others we are committing a sacrilege and God cannot bless those actions.

Secondly, there was no attempt to discover the will of God. The elders were convinced that they were right and simply abrogated the right to direct the ark. Thirdly, the priests who were in charge of the ark were corrupt. Technically speaking, Eli was the high priest. He had come under God's judgment for refusing to discipline his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who had day-to-day charge of the tabernacle and its worship.

Eli's sons were two of the most despicable priests in the history of Israel: **"Now the sons of Eli were worthless men; they did not know the LORD and the custom of the priests with the people. When any man was offering a sacrifice, the priest's servant would come while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand. Then he would thrust it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. Thus they did in Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. Also, before they burned the fat, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, 'Give the priest meat for roasting, as he will not take boiled meat from you, only raw.' If the man said to him, 'They must surely burn the fat first, and then take as much as you desire,' then he would say, 'No, but you shall give it to me now; and if not, I will take it by force.' Thus the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD, for the men despised the offering of the LORD"** (1 Samuel 2:12-17).

You might think that disregard for the holy God of Israel could not get any worse, but it did: **"Now Eli was very old; and he heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting"** (1 Samuel 2:22). Hophni and Phinehas were evil men representing themselves as the preeminent spiritual guides of Israel. They simply did not know God, so when the elders called for the ark to go before the army of Israel like a pagan talisman, they immediately agreed. Why would God ever bless such an effort? If not to be holy then what else was Israel for?

Let us take a moment to analyze this attempt to use the ark as if it was a cannon. The mission (or missional vision) was clear: Drive the enemy out of the land! The strategic vision looked good from the outside: Use the ark of God! But a look at the prophetic vision reveals the spiritual bankruptcy of their effort: Ignore God! Or to state the complexity better: Ignore and disrespect God most of the time, and then demand that he save the day.

2. THE SAD RESULTS OF TRUSTING SPIRITUAL TECHNOLOGY

Of course God takes orders from no one, so a shocking string of horrible results from Israel's disregard for God then began to unfold: **"When the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, 'What does the noise 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. The Philistines were afraid, for they said, 'God [or "a god"] has come into the camp.' And they said, 'Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who shall deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who smote the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. Take courage and be men, O Philistines, or you will become slaves to the Hebrews, as they have been slaves to you; therefore, be men and fight.' So the Philistines fought and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent; and the slaughter was very great, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. And the**

ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died" (1 Samuel 4:6-11).

The Philistines were stricken with fear at the arrival of the ark, but the logic of their attack had not changed. Either Israel would be beaten into servitude to Philistia or the Philistines would become the slaves of the Israelites, so the invaders decided to fight. God had already warned Israel about ignoring him through a man of God sent to prophesy to Eli, the high priest: **"Therefore the LORD God of Israel declares, 'I did indeed say that your house and the house of your father should walk before Me forever'; but now the LORD declares, 'Far be it from Me-- for those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed'"** (1 Samuel 2:30). This ought to have been a stunning word of rebuke which struck fear into the heart of every Israelite and which touched off a wave of national repentance. Instead Israel voted to see what God really meant by the phrase "lightly esteemed."

They learned the hard way that God is not obligated to bless anyone. He does so only as an act of free grace in accordance with his holy attributes and the covenants he has made with mankind. This bitter lesson cost Israel the lifeblood of thirty thousand men. They were forced to watch the holiest article in the land carried off by pagans who despised the Holy God of Israel. Hophni and Phinehas paid for their wickedness and presumption with their lives.

But the discipline of the Lord did not end there: **"Now a man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day with his clothes torn and dust on his head. When he came, behold, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road eagerly watching, because his heart was trembling for the ark of God. So the man came to tell it in the city, and all the city cried out. When Eli heard the noise of the outcry, he said, 'What does the noise of this commotion mean?' Then the man came hurriedly and told Eli. Now Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes were set so that he could not see. The man said to Eli, 'I am the one who came from the battle line. Indeed, I escaped from the battle line today.' And he said, 'How did things go, my son?' Then the one who brought the news replied, 'Israel has fled before the Philistines and there has also been a great slaughter among the people, and your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been taken.' When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell off the seat backward beside the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for he was old and heavy. Thus he judged Israel forty years"** (1 Samuel 4:12-18).

And the hard lesson did not end yet: **"Now his daughter-in-law, Phinehas's wife, was pregnant and about to give birth; and when she heard the news that the ark of God was taken and that her father-in-law and her husband had died, she knelt down and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. And about the time of her death the women who stood by her said to her, 'Do not be afraid, for you have given birth to a son.' But she did not answer or pay attention. And she called the boy Ichabod, saying, 'The glory has departed from Israel,' because the ark of God was taken and because of her father-in-law and her husband. She said, 'The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God was taken'"** (1 Samuel 4:19-22).

On top of the slaughter and the loss of the ark the high priest of Israel lost his life and the wife of Phinehas died in childbirth, leaving behind a son named to commemorate the sorrow of the nation.

3. THE MEANING OF SPIRITUAL TECHNOLOGY

The word "technology" describes the methods and materials used to produce results, so spiritual technology describes the methods and materials used to produce spiritual results. Israel seemed to think that by manipulating the location of the ark they could get the power of God to work on their behalf, like a spiritual howitzer. This is a thoroughly pagan concept of how God works but you can see how they could be confused. After all, they were not bringing a Canaanite idol into the war, it was the ark that God had told them to build. Furthermore, it was something God had told them to do in the past (Num. 10:33).

The great lesson, largely unlearned in our day, is that spiritual technology is not enough. The methods and materials of God are useless without the God of the methods and materials! Never let anyone tell you that the religion of Israel was not personal. It was deeply personal because God is deeply personal. Religion without the desire to know and please God is worse than useless because it offends God deeply and leads people astray.

What things represent spiritual technology today in the church? Things like formulas for success, coffee, videos, stories, mass mailings, evangelism methods, buildings, study guides, quiet time patterns, altar calls, focus groups, master planning, organs, guitars, Bible versions, falling down, pews, kids clubs--you get the idea. Any material or method we use in serving God is a spiritual technology. The worst outcome of using spiritual technology without God is for it to work in some human sense such as gathering people or increasing income. That would not be the blessing of God but the judgment of God! It is quite possible to gather people and money to the body of Christ without God's intervention.

This is crucial: Was the glory of God departed because the ark, the place where the glory was manifested, was lost? It may be that the manifestation of God's glory was lost, but believers can never lose God. He said he would never leave Israel nor forsake them, and he has said the same to us. The elders thought that God had allowed a defeat because the ark was not with them, but it was because their hearts were not with him. Phinehas' wife thought the glory of God had departed because the ark was taken, but the working of God departs when our hearts are taken by anything other than God.

Every generation is in danger of identifying the work of God with particular spiritual technologies and we must fight that trend with all our might.

4. THE USE OF SPIRITUAL TECHNOLOGY

What should Israel have done when faced with the attack of the Philistines? What should believers today do when we are confronted with challenges of every sort? We can find out by simply reversing everything the Israelites did in this sad episode. First, we need to remember God and his holiness. We must never let the wholesome fear of God be driven out by any other

fear. Secondly, we need to be brokenhearted about our sins. Israel was tolerating the foulest of sins in the place where there should have been the greatest concern for God's holiness. This episode shows just what lengths the human heart will go to avoid repenting of sin. If you are a believer, do you nevertheless have sins in your life for which you are not living in repentance? Perhaps you have never repented of your sins. That means that God's means of removing them has never been applied to you, and it means that you face every earthly threat without God's protection. I urge you to change your mind about the wisdom of that! Christ will change everything if you simply pray to confess your sins to him and receive his forgiveness.

Thirdly, every spiritual need in the church needs to be addressed by seeking the Lord, not by the use of some spiritual technology. We must preserve our heart hope in God by refusing to buy the lottery ticket, refusing to trust the process of Natural Church Development or any other method or material. Fourthly, we need to satisfy the holiness of God by bringing leaders and others under restorative discipline when they fail. How is it possible that the leaders of Israel knew the venality, avarice, and adultery of Hophni and Phinehas yet did nothing about it? Usually that indicates a guilty silence. They did not want to be disciplined for their own sins, so they declined to deal with their chief priests. Let me ask one more time: If Israel and the church are not for holiness, then what are they for?

Finally, let us use every spiritual technology by God's direction with our eyes wide open. Does any woman want a lover who brings her flowers every week but who demeans her in public? Does any man want a friend who lets him borrow his boat but who verbally trashes him to their other friends? No. Then neither does our loving God want followers who do religious things, sometimes even with great sacrifice, but who do not love and trust him above all others. Paul the Apostle wrote: **"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing"** (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

There is no getting around the personal God revealed to the whole world through Jesus Christ. Why would you want to?