

1 Samuel 4:1-18; 5 and 6

Aim of lesson

To show what happened to the ark in the time of Samuel, and to demonstrate that it is vital to have the right attitude when worshipping God.

Background study

Exodus 25:10-22; 1 Samuel 7.

Suggested outline of lesson

With the aid of a good picture, remind the children what the ark of God was, its size, what it contained, and that it was kept in the most holy place in the tabernacle into which only the high Priest entered once a year. Recall also the way in which the glory of God appeared between the cherubim, which were above the ark, and how the ark was considered the most sacred object in Israel.

Many of the people of Israel had at this time neglected the worship of God and were worshipping idols again. The priests failed to lead the people as they should have done, and God was very displeased. Ask the children if they remember the means God used to punish the Israelite's wickedness and to bring them back to him. The Philistines had conquered much of Israel's territory and now engaged in a further attack. Use a map to show the site of the battle, and describe Israel's crushing defeat.

A foolish decision

The people knew that God had not been with them and they sought to rectify this by sending for the ark to be brought from Shiloh. Perhaps they thought about the fall of Jericho, when the ark had been carried in procession, and considered that it was what was lacking on this occasion. Their reasoning, however, was faulty and their plan was not in accordance with God's will. The priests should have known this and forbidden the taking of the ark from the tabernacle. They should have exhorted the people to repent of their wickedness and plead for God's forgiveness and guidance, but they were weak and immoral themselves and they colluded in this folly of taking the ark into battle as if it were a mascot which might bring them good luck. It seems that they had a misguided and superstitious idea that God dwelt in the ark alone, and that the actual structure had some magical properties. Reference may be made to the practice, common even today, of keeping lucky charms in the superstitious belief that they will protect the owner. Make clear the futility of this idea.

Israel defeated, the ark captured, Eli dead

Convey the misguided excitement of the army of Israel on seeing the ark arrive at the battlefield, and the mighty shout of greeting. Describe the effect of this noise on the Philistines who knew of Israel's past exploits and were spurred on to a greater determination

to win. In describing the battle, stress the totality of the defeat: thirty thousand men had died, the ark of God had been captured and Hophni and Phinehas had both been killed. When the terrible news reached the aged Eli, the shock caused his death.

In the house of Dagon

The Philistines rejoiced in their capture of the ark and bore it in triumph to the temple of Dagon whom they believed had granted their victory. However, their triumph soon turned to horror and dread. For seven months the ark was with them, and they turned out to be seven months they would never forget. Graphic descriptions are given of what happened to the people of Ashdod, Gath and Ekron. It seems likely that the ark was also taken to Gaza and Ashkelon (chapter 6:17-18) and it left behind a trail of disease, panic and death. At last the counsellors of the Philistines advised that the ark should be returned in such a way as to demonstrate whether or not Israel's God had caused the plague and, if so, to placate him. Normally the cows separated from their calves would have returned to their young, but an unseen hand led them straight to Israel.

Relevance to the children's lives

Do you know people who say that some things bring good luck and that some things bring bad luck? What does today's lesson teach us about this? Do people who truly believe in God need to rely on such things, considering that God works in a very real way in the lives of those who love and obey him?

The ark returns

Describe the harvest scene at Beth Shemesh and convey the emotion of the people as they saw the precious ark returning to them. It was the Levites, in accordance with the Law, who lifted it down from the cart and who led the people in an act of worship and thanksgiving. All this was observed by the Philistine lords who carried back a report to their own city. What they did not witness was the striking down of seventy Israelites who wilfully flouted the Law and dared to approach the ark and look into it. The lesson was clear, that neither the Israelites nor the Philistines could trifle with the things of God, nor disregard his Law. In fear the people of Beth Shemesh sent messengers to Kiriath Jearim to ask them to take the ark. This they did, lawfully and reverently, and the ark stayed there safely for the next twenty years.

If time allows, present the sequel to the story, of repentance and victory (chapter 7) inspired by the strong leadership of Samuel.

Worksheets

The numbers in the arrows are, from the top: 6,5,1,9,4,2,10,3,7,8.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, we are glad that you have power over all. Please help us to rely on your help and guidance. Amen.

Memory verse

“My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:2).