THE GLORY DEPARTS

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

1 Samuel 4:2–7:2

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

[The wife of Phinehas] said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured." (1 Sam. 4:22)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Nov. 2	Rev. 21:1–4, 19–27	Bask in God's Eternal Glory
T	Nov. 3	Ezek. 10:1–7	The Glory of the Lord
W	Nov. 4	Ezek. 10:15–19; 11:22–25	God's Glory Leaves the Temple
Th	Nov. 5	Gal. 6:1–10	We Reap What We Sow
F	Nov. 6	1 Sam. 6:13–18	Rejoice in God's Glory
Sa	Nov. 7	2 Cor. 5:1–10	God's Judgment Is Sure

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Once again, we see the consequences of ancient Israel breaking its covenant with God. In the last lesson, we read how Eli's sons used their position as priests to take advantage of the people for personal gain. Their disregard for God's law was a manifestation of Israel's unfaithfulness.

The symbol of God's presence with Israel was the ark of the covenant. It was a constant reminder of the covenant relationship God had made with them. When Moses built the ark, he placed inside of it the stone tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were carved. Israel had not paid much attention to the commandments and the other laws that God gave them, but they readily paid lip service to God when they were in desperate situations. When they were confronted by their enemy, they brought the ark to the battlefield thinking its mere presence would bring them victory.

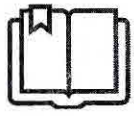
The victory of the Philistines over Israel showed that the ark was not a magical object that could be used to manipulate God. Even before Israel's defeat, "the word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread" (1 Sam. 3:1). Phinehas's wife lamented that, because the ark had been captured, the glory of God had departed from Israel.

Although the Israelites were defeated, God was not. The misfortunes that the Philistines experienced while they possessed the ark showed them that the God of Israel was

not to be toyed with. They didn't become worshipers, but they acknowledged the power of Israel's God and returned the ark along with offerings of penance.

In the background, God was preparing for something new. Samuel was growing in stature as "a trustworthy prophet of the LORD" (3:20).

Lord God, lead us in your ways so your glory will shine through us. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

1 Samuel 4:12–22

4:12 A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came
to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with
earth upon his head. 13When he arrived, Eli was sitting upon his
seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of
God. When the man came into the city and told the news, all the
city cried out. 14When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said,
"What is this uproar?" Then the man came quickly and told Eli.
15Now Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes were set, so that
he could not see. 16The man said to Eli, "I have just come from the
battle; I fled from the battle today." He said, "How did it go, my
son?" 17The messenger replied, "Israel has fled before the
Philistines, and there has also been a great slaughter among the
troops; your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and
the ark of God has been captured." 18When he mentioned the ark
of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate,
and his neck was broken, and he died, for he was an old man and
heavy. He had judged Israel forty years.

19Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. When she heard the news that the ark of God was captured and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth, for her labor pains overwhelmed her. 20As she was about to die, the women attending her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son." But she did not answer or give heed. 21She named the child Ichabod, meaning, "The glory has departed from Israel," because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. 22She said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

ISRAEL TAKES GOD FOR GRANTED

After their initial defeat at the hands of the Philistines, Israel attributed their loss to the absence of God. They thought they could remedy this by sending to Shiloh and having Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli, bring the ark of the covenant to the army's camp.

When they saw the ark, the army gave a great shout. Their spirits were revived. They thought that surely God would deliver them. The Philistines, on the other hand, were afraid. They knew how Pharaoh had been compelled to let the Hebrews flee from Egypt. They had heard how God's people had been fed manna in the wilderness and defeated the kings who got in their way. They attributed these mighty acts to Israel's God, but they didn't understand that the God of Israel was the one true God. They saw the Lord as one of many deities, each with their favored nation. Even though their theology was inadequate, in some ways they understood how to relate to God better than Israel did. They knew that a divine being was not to be taken for granted.

As the Philistines saw it, their victory was evidence that their gods were stronger than the God of Israel. They treated the captured ark of the covenant like a spoil of war. They took it to Ashdod, one of the five cities of the Philistines, and placed it in the house of their primary god Dagon. When they went in the next two mornings, they found Dagon lying prostrate before the ark. Then a plague struck Ashdod, and the people took it as a sign that the God of Israel was not pleased. The ark was passed to other cities, which suffered the same consequences. Finally, the priests of the Philistines determined what had to be done. They sent the ark back to Israel with a generous amount of gold.

Israel rejoiced when the ark returned. They offered sacrifices to God and made sure that qualified Levites tended to it. One group, the descendants of Jeconiah, didn't pay proper respect to the ark, and seventy of their men were killed. Israel was chastised. The ark was moved to Kiriath-jearim and Eleazar was consecrated to care for it. The next twenty years were a time of lamentation for Israel.

How can we show proper respect for God?

GOD'S GIFT OF GLORY

God is invisible, but God makes God's self known to us in God's glory. The presence of God filled the temple when Solomon dedicated it as a house of worship (1 Kgs. 8:11). Isaiah was reminded that "the whole earth is full of God's glory" (Isa. 6:3). Like radio waves that are constantly around us, we don't notice God's glory for what it is unless we are tuned in. Sometimes God reveals God's self to us unexpectedly, the way Saul was blinded by a light from heaven on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3–6). Other times we experience God's glory like a soft glow that surrounds us, an assurance that upholds us. When ancient Israel ordered their lives according to God's laws given at Sinai, they experienced God's presence and glory in their daily affairs.

When Israel neglected God's law and "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg. 21:25), God's glory was no longer part of their lives. It was as if their receptors that put them on the same wavelength with God had been turned off. God was still God, but Israel chose to ignore the one who was the source of their well-being.

When the ark of the covenant, the symbol of God's presence with Israel, was captured by the Philistines, God's glory departed from Israel, but it was not snuffed out. The Philistines experienced that glory when Dagon was damaged and tumors infected the population (1 Sam. 5:11–12). These afflictions were God's way of letting the Philistines know that, in spite of their waywardness, the ark belonged with ancient Israel.

Israel received the ark back with proper respect. They made sacrifices and erected a stone to commemorate its return. Yet all was not right in their relationship with God. It must have been like two estranged partners living in the same household with some underlying issues unresolved until, after twenty years, Samuel intervened to bring about a more complete reconciliation.

The ark is no longer among us to remind us that God's glory surrounds us. However, "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Jesus fulfills God's law so that through him all have access to the glory of God.

How do you experience God's glory?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Sometimes we let the things that God gives us lead us away from God. God gave ancient Israel the ark as a symbol of God's presence, but Israel used that symbol to justify doing whatever felt right at the time.

Generations later, Jesus condemned the religious leaders for following the letter of the law while violating its spirit. "Woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds and neglect justice and the love of God" (Luke 11:42). We have to be careful to receive God's gifts as they were intended and not use them to rationalize what we do.

Jesus teaches that God's law is summarized like this: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. We often take God's law out of context and follow it in ways that are anything but loving. Slavery in the United States was justified by appealing to biblical law that put limits on its practice in ancient times—before the Holy Spirit worked on the conscience of society to show how enslaving people violated God's law of love. A literal reading of God's law is still used to exclude whole categories of people from leadership in the church.

We can twist God's blessings to justify all kinds of things. A fine building and a large budget may be blessings that allow a church to expand its gospel witness into the world. But we have to be careful that those material blessings don't become ends in themselves that distract us from works of justice and mercy. God gives resources as tools so we can live by the law of love. A nation is blessed if it has a robust religious life and its leaders are guided by faith. However, if a people see their blessings as indisputable evidence that they are divinely chosen as an instrument of God, they can neglect generosity and justice in the interests of power and wealth. They can justify imperialism against weaker nations as a holy crusade. They can rationalize neglect of the poor with the rationale that they are merely being fair to the rich. Today's lesson is a cautionary tale of what can go wrong when we take God for granted and try to enlist God for our own ends.

Where in the life of the nation, the church, or the individual do we have to be careful not to take God's presence for granted?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. Samuel recedes from view after 1 Samuel 3 but returns to the spotlight in chapter 7. While Samuel continues to lead Israel both politically and spiritually, the seeds of transition from judges to a more centralized government are being planted.
2. The ark's capture and delivery to the land of the Philistines becomes a sign to both sides of the battle lines that Israel's God was inferior to Dagon, the god of the Philistines. This inevitably moves Israel to centralize its military under a unified leader rather than rely on the regional governance of judges.