

“Trusting When God Seems Absent [Part One]”

It's been my experience, and the experience of Christians through the ages, that there are times when things are going great and you feel a closeness to God and it is awesome, and it is amazing, words can't even express how ridiculously cool it is! But then...but then there are times when you wonder where God went. You see this in scripture; you see it in the writings of ancient Christians throughout the ages. It happens to everybody and when it does, it's discouraging, it's disorienting, and it's difficult.

Especially when we read scriptures where God tells us things like, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” We want to say, “Because if you're here God, I need to know it. My faith needs to feel it.” These feelings happen and they can cause some deep struggles particularly if we're going through turmoil. So I want us to see what's up with these times when God seems absent, and what we're to do, or not do, during those times.

To get at this we'll be looking at the book of 1 Samuel in the Old Testament where there's this time in the history of Israel where they thought God had left them and they weren't sure what to do.

It starts in chapter 4 if you want to follow along. I want you to read this on your own this week, so what I'm going to do is tell the story. Here's what's going on... The Israelites are fighting their archenemies, the Philistines. So, who are they? The Philistines had come to the Holy Land, to Israel, from across the sea. And they were so powerful that they quickly gained control of the major cities along the coast. Those cities were regarded by the Israelites as centers of hopeless barbarianism, and incivility, and cruelty. So the cities were: Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Branson (actually that's Gath!).

The Israelites lived in mortal fear of the Philistines mainly because the Philistines had the ability to forge iron and they controlled that technology completely. They had iron swords, and spears, and arrow heads—technology of the Iron Age. The Israelites were fighting with the technology of the Stone Age.

But Israel goes to war against the Philistines and in the first battle the Israelites are badly beaten. After the battle they get together to debrief. And they ask the question people always ask when something goes wrong, “Why did this happen to us? Where was God? What can we do to fix this?” And then, somebody gets an idea and says, “Let's have another battle. Only this time, we'll use our secret weapon. This time, let's bring the Ark of the Covenant into the battle.”

The Ark of the Covenant, you'll remember it from *Indian Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, is a box made of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold. Now, to call it a box is a huge understatement. That's like calling the Grand Canyon a drainage ditch, or the paintings in Sistine Chapel, some nice little sketches. This “box” held the tablets of the Ten Commandments that were given to Moses along with some manna and Aaron's staff. The things in it were important, but what was even more important is that the Israelites believed that it was God's throne.

The idea of the Ark was that where the Ark was, God was. So somebody got this idea. “They've got iron. We've got the Ark.” That's like having the atomic bomb. And bringing the ark into the battle was a way of saying, “All right, God. Your glory is on the line now. You have to come through. Otherwise, people won't just think about us as losers. People are going to think about you, Yahweh, as a loser. You've got to come through. We've got to win. Go and do our bidding.”

So what's going on here is a shift from thinking about God as someone that they must serve, that they must obey, to thinking about God as somebody who could be kind of useful to them, who could get them what they wanted. They thought to themselves, “We have God in a box.”

Another way of putting this comes from the contemporary theologian Homer Simpson. Well, in one episode of “The Simpsons”—so I'm told, anyway--Homer, the dad, pledges money to a Telethon, but it's money he doesn't have. He's just tired of having his television show interrupted. They find out he doesn't have the money, and as punishment, he's forced to serve as a missionary on a Pacific island. It's not a real realistic plot, I realize, but he goes there to serve as a missionary. And the people that he's serving build a new church. Now, Homer is really proud of their accomplishment. And he sums it up like this. Homer says, as he looks at this building, “Well, I may not know much about God, but I have to say we built a nice, little cage for him.”

We're cage builders. We build cages for creatures, because then we can control them. We can keep them where we want them. We can have them on hand when we desire them. We can keep them from getting too wild, or too free.

And the Israelites were more or less saying, “We've got God in a box. And listen you Philistines, don't make me open my God-box. Don't make me open this box of...you know what.” I don't know much about God, but we sure built him a nice, little cage.

Now don't judge them too quickly for this God-in-a-box thinking. Because I think we do it all the time. Sometimes, we think, "If I just keep up my end of the spiritual bargain, if I go to church once in a while, read my Bible occasionally, pray the right prayers, be a good person, avoid scandals and big sexual sins, and keep my nose clean. If I love God a little bit, and love others a little bit, and serve the world a little bit, then God better keep up his end of the bargain. He'd better give me what I want or my faith is going to start to get pretty shaky." That's God-in-a-box thinking.

Let me ask you this: What happens if it turns out that God doesn't like to be put in a box? What if he's not so tame, this God? What if his love should turn out to be so fierce, and so pure, and so holy that it can't be manipulated, not even by real, clever prayers? What if this God that we serve turns out to be so deep, and good, and strong, and wild, and free that he can't be put in a cage? What if God uses unexpected people, and un-predicted events, and unforeseen gifts and unlikely channels?

And let me ask you this too: Is there any area where you've been trying to put God in a box? I wonder, just between you and God, is there any place where you have been insisting that God bend to your agenda? Maybe it involves a relationship. Maybe it involves your finances. Maybe it involves what your ministry looks like. And what you need to say today is, "All right, God. I'll quit insisting on my own way. I'll quit trying to manipulate stuff and control stuff. I will quit trying to use you, God, and I'll just serve you." Because maybe the real question here is this: Is God enough for you—just God—even if you don't win the battle, even if you don't get what you want? I wonder, when is the last time you told God, "God, I love you no matter what—whether you give me what I ask for or you don't. Whether I ever understand or I don't, God, I just love you."?

So the Israelites decide to go to battle against the Philistines again, but this time they say, "Let's take the Ark into the battle!" It's their secret weapon. They just know that they can't lose. Guess what happens? They lose. They lose big time. A catastrophe.

A messenger runs all the way from the battlefield, almost 20 miles to the nearest city, Shiloh, to give the news—the bad news. The messenger runs back to one man, Eli, the old priest who sits by the city gate waiting for the news. The messenger gives Eli four pieces of news. And each piece goes from bad to worse. He starts by saying, "We lost the battle. And worse than that, the army was essentially wiped out—30,000 died."

Third piece of news: "Worse than that, Eli, your sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were both killed." But it gets even worse. The messenger says, "And the unthinkable has happened. The Ark of the Covenant has been captured. The Ark is gone." That's the climax of the bad news and it gets said over and over again to emphasize the tragedy, "The Ark of the Covenant has been captured." "The Ark of the Covenant has been captured." "The Ark of the Covenant has been captured." The news is so bad that Eli falls over and dies. He survived all the bad news, even hearing of his sons' deaths, but he could not take the fact that the Ark of the Covenant had been captured.

What's the big deal about the Ark of the Covenant being captured? We see the explanation in Eli's daughter-in-law, now a widow. She's very pregnant and when she gets the news of what's happened she goes into labor. And as she gives birth to her child the midwife who is helping her wants to encourage her and says, "Don't despair. You've given birth to a son. Even in the midst of all this death, there's still hope. Life will go on." But the mother looks at her newborn son and says, "I will name him Ichabod. Because the glory has departed from Israel, for the Ark of God has been captured."

She names him Ichabod. Ichabod is the negative form of a word that is the most important word in this story. It's the word "*kabod*." The Hebrew word ***kabod* means glory**. That's a great word. It was a word for everything that was majestic, and awesome, and worthy of honor. Where there was *kabod*, there was dignity and there was meaning. And in a dark, fallen, sorry, difficult, mostly-illiterate, mostly-impooverished world, there was transcendent purpose. And there was hope. *Kabod*.

Now in Hebrew language when you put an "I" in front of this word it becomes the negative form of it. The mother doesn't name the child *Kabod*, but **Ichabod. The glory is gone**. Hope is gone. God is gone. Ichabod.

It makes me think about the Blue Ridge Mall in Kansas City. Growing up we lived in Warrensburg—a small town about an hour away from Kansas City. It was a huge, huge deal to load up in the Plymouth Fury and go to Blue Ridge Mall. It was a magical place. It had all kinds of stores. It was buzzing with people. It

had a restaurant that slowly spun around as you ate. It had toy stores, and book stores, and hobby stores. It had an Orange Julius stand and an ice cream shop where you could get bubble gum ice cream. It was like heaven on earth! Kabod! But then Independence Center opened down the road. It was bigger with new stores, and a new look, and Blue Ridge Mall went downhill. The people just left it.

I had a meeting in that area 7 or 8 years ago and I thought it would be nostalgic to stop in. It was heart-breaking. Very few stores in it any more—most everything boarded up. The spinning restaurant was gone. The only people there were walkers in their squeaky shoes. Everything I knew was no longer there. When I was a kid it was the Blue Ridge Mall. It had become the Ichabod Mall. Now it's been completely torn down and replaced with a Wal-Mart Supercenter.

We went to a K.C. Royals game last Saturday and it was fun. But it's hard to not look back and compare. Man, in the 80's and early 90's the Royals had it going on. They had George Brett, Bo Jackson, Brett Saberhagen. They won the World Series in 1985. Back then the stadium was packed, the energy was off the charts, the players were heroes, love abounded! Kabod!

But since 2000, no more titles, and no more acclaim, and no excitement, and no crowds, just horrible, brutal, losing records, awful games, nightmarish scenarios year after year after year after year after year. They used to be the K.C. Royals. Now, they are they are the K.C Ichabods. The glory is gone.

Prior to May 22 Cunningham Park, had big trees, a great playground, tennis courts—kabod! Now it's all gone. It's Ichabod Park.

This mother is giving birth to her baby in the midst of all this tragedy and when he's born she hangs this name on her child—Ichabod. Why would she do that? Because for those people this is not just about losing a battle. This is not just losing some religious relic. To them, if the Ark is gone, that means God is gone! If the Ark is gone, that means the faith that they had been following and counting on was nothing but wishful thinking. The Ark is just a box.

This woman giving birth is saying, "God is gone. There is no hope for life. It's all just a cruel illusion. There's no hope of something beyond the grave. You live and you die, and that's the end of it." There are a whole lot of people in our world today who live in a world called Ichabod.

At this point, everything inside of us wants to rush on to the rest of the story. We all want assurance that everything is going to turn out great, we want to hear some good news that everybody is going to be happy. But we have to pause here in the story, because this moment is a part of the story of the people of God, and yours and mine.

What do you do when it looks like God—this God that you have based everything in your life upon—is gone and it doesn't look like he's coming back? What do you do when you find out your name is Ichabod?

You lost your job and you can't find another one, and you're not asking God for the moon. You're not asking to be a millionaire. You just want to be able to work. And you don't know if you can pay the bills. And you feel like such a failure. And the worst part is, where's God?

Or you carry with you a weight of anxiety or depression. That's not how you want to live. You want to live in trust and peace. But sometimes, your mind worries and your heart races so much you can't sleep. You can't eat. You're not sure you can get through the rest of your life like this. You're not sure you can get through another day like this. You're not sure you want to. And you wonder, "Where's God?"

A mom with young children still at home feels a lump one day. She goes to the doctor. She gets a phone call. It is malignant. She may not live to see her children grow up. She wonders, "What did I do wrong?" She wonders, when she hears other people talk about prayers being answered that seem so trivial to her now, "Why doesn't God just answer this one prayer of mine—just this one? He can do this."

Your deep desire was for a God-honoring, joy-filled marriage. But it hasn't happened. Maybe you have not married, and it looks like you never will. Maybe you have been betrayed by somebody. Maybe you are married, but it is a joyless, lifeless, heavy road and you keep pouring out your heart to God, but it doesn't seem to change.

Maybe your heart breaks over a child that you just love, but is a runaway, or a rebel, or just hostile. Maybe you have a dream for ministry that looks like it's never going to come true. Maybe there is some kind of brokenness inside you that you keep crying out to God, "God, change it," but it just doesn't change. What do

you do when the glory is gone? In this story, there's no formula, no easy solution to recapture lost glory. And the reality is that we do not have God in a box.

There is a time to talk about our part. "What am I supposed to do? How should I respond?" and we're going to talk about that some next week, but not right now. Not right now because what happens next in this story is not what the Israelites do at all. It's what they don't do. For the Israelites, when the Ark had been captured, when the glory was gone, their job for a while was this: "Hold on. Watch, wait, remember, don't despair." And for some of you, that's what you need to do. Watch, wait, remember, don't despair, don't give up, don't give in, don't quit.

Because now, the story is about what God does. And what God does next is staggering. Make sure you see this from an ancient perspective, not ours. Because God allows the Philistines to drag his Ark—the manifestation of his presence—from his people to the enemy. And the Philistines had a big parade showing off the Ark and how they defeated the Israelites AND how their god defeated the God of the Israelites. And the whole way, the Philistines would mock this Ark, this God of the Israelites who was being dragged along on a wagon who could not save his own people and he couldn't even save himself. They taunt him the whole way.

This God of Israel allows himself to be taken captive. What kind of God would manifest himself in weakness, and humility, and shame on behalf of, in identification with his people? What kind of God would do such a thing?

You understand, this is telling us something about the kind of God that we serve. This is a little foreshadowing of a day that would come, a day that did come, when God would be present on the earth, not in a box, not in an Ark, but in a person. John says in his Gospel, "**And we beheld his glory...**" "The word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld his glory and it didn't look anything like what we thought it was going to look like." No power. No money. No title. No army. And at the end of a financially-poor life, his body is taken captive. And it's paraded through the streets to be mocked, and spat on, and taunted on the road to Golgotha. "You who would save others, you can't even save your own self."

And God, on the cross, becomes *Ichabod*. No glory. He takes on our shame, knows our aloneness, our desperate cry for a God who seems far away. "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me? Why is my name *Ichabod*?" Our God says this from the cross.

And the weight of all of that sin, and all of that shame, and all of that God forsakenness is borne by this One. And he dies. And his body, the manifestation of God on this earth, is placed in a tomb. And Pontius Pilate posts a guard to stand watch to make sure nothing would happen to this body, to make sure that the movement that this man Jesus started is thoroughly tamed, thoroughly domesticated. Pilate says to himself, "I don't know much about this Jesus, but we sure have built him a nice, little cage."

But what he didn't know, and what the human race continually is surprised by century after century after century after century, is we serve a God who just won't be caged. "And on the third day..." On the third day, something happened.

Next week we see how God gets himself free from the Philistines and what God does in the night when no one is watching. Next week, we find out how the *kabod* comes back home. And it's a phenomenal story. The anticipation of how that happens, well, for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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