

Israel defeated

• *Enquiring into the cause*

• *The wrong answer – more religion needed*

• *God's people fail to see the real cause – sin at Shiloh*

• *Religiousness cannot 'make up for' disobedience*

• *A return to old traditions will not bring victory*

Religious superstition

• *Trusting in other things instead of God*

• *Marching into battle with a combination of sin and religiousness*

Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phineas, brought terrible corruption to the heart of the nation. Calamity was bound to fall upon Israel soon.

One day the nation goes out to battle against their old enemies, the Philistines. Israelis defeated and loses four thousand men¹.

When we experience defeat we need to enquire into the cause. When Israel was defeated in so striking a manner it was natural for them to ask why. So the elders of the people asked 'Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines?'¹. They were right to ask the question, and they were right to attribute their defeat to the LORD. On previous occasions victory had been given them, sometimes quite miraculously. When they were right with God, they were victorious. When they sinned they experienced defeat.

However, spiritual understanding in Israel was at a low level. Their question was right, but they came up with an answer that was foolish. They decided that they needed to be more religious than ever before, and carry the ark of the LORD before them as they went into battle. They thought this would bring back their old spiritual power¹.

When God's people fail they often increase their 'religiousness', but to do so does no good. The cause of the failure of Israel is the sin at Shiloh! Can they not see it? Apparently not. When the ark of the LORD is taken out to battle, Hophni and Phineas, the very men whose wickedness had brought such defeat upon the nation, are there alongside it¹. The ark will do no good, but the presence of Hophni and Phineas will invite calamity.

It was a move in the direction of religiousness. When the people of God sin, strangely we can intensify our religiousness to somehow 'make up for' the fact of our disobedience. (We recall the useless fasting of Isaiah 58:3 and the explanation of its uselessness in Isaiah 58:4.)

It was also a move in the direction of traditionalism. Israel had many years ago gone into battle with the ark in front of them and had been given great victory. It was present at the time of the conquest of Jericho^{1,2}. They thought that increased religion and a return to the traditions of the old days would somehow bring them victory against the Philistines.

This is religious superstition. Often people with little knowledge of God think that if they put their trust in some religious object, then all will be well and God will be with them. Superstition is when we put our trust in buildings or in religious objects or in 'holy' people, instead of dealing directly with God. There is only one thing that enables us to please God and get his victories. That is to deal with him directly, to find out his will for our life, and get on with pleasing him by direct obedience. If that is not done, no amount of religion or tradition will bring his blessing.

The people go forward with this strange combination. There with the army of Israel was the ark of God which symbolised God's holy presence. But they were totally unaware of the demands of God's holiness and there also with the ark were Hophni and Phineas. It is called the 'ark of the covenant'¹. The covenant is the arrangement between Israel and God made at the time of Moses. God had said if they would obey his voice, they would be a holy nation². He had required that the summary of the law, the ten commandments, should

¹ 4:1b-2

¹ 4:3a

¹ 4:3b

¹ 4:4

¹ Josh 3:6

² Josh 6:6

¹ 4:4

² Ex 19:5,6

be placed within the ark. Maybe it was there as they were carrying it. But if the law was inside the ark, Hophni and Phineas who had broken God's law in numerous ways were only a few yards away from the written law they had broken. They were marching into battle with a combination of sin and religiousness, with a combination of tradition and carelessness.

• *A doomed approach*

• *Only faith and obedience brings blessing*

• *Great shouts of jubilation nevertheless a massive defeat*

• *Superstition is deception*

• *The right question but the wrong answer*

• *True for today – only through Jesus!*

Such superstition was doomed from the start! God simply does not bless a combination of religious traditionalism with wickedness. It was of no value to use the ark as a kind of 'good luck charm'. People often use churches and ministers in this way, thinking that some kind of good will come merely by their connections with church or by getting a preacher to say a prayer for them. But the blessings of God come with direct faith in God and obedience to what he is asking. The kind of religiosity that falls into superstition is of no value at all and is quite deceptive.

The Israelites get very excited, very 'pentecostal', and shout great shouts of jubilation and expectation¹. But charismatic religiosity will not be blessed more than any other religiosity if there is sin in the camp. The Philistines hear about it and they are alarmed². The people of God and the pagans are as superstitious as each other! When the people of God are a long way from the LORD they are not much different from those who are totally without faith in the God of the Bible. The inevitable happens. The Israelites are defeated and 'the slaughter was very great'³.

Superstition does no good. It does not prevent the judgement of God. It deceives men and women because it makes them think that God is somehow nearer. But without a Saviour, without righteousness, superstition can only bring the wrath of God nearer.

The question they asked was the right one. 'Why has the LORD defeated us...?' The true answer was, 'Because sin is at the heart of the nation, in Shiloh.' The next thing would have been to plead with Eli to remove his sons, and to plead with the LORD to return to them and have mercy upon them.

The same is true today. The way to know God is to face the facts of our sinfulness and call upon Jesus to cleanse us. Then God will come to us and give us victory over every kind of evil.

1 4:5

2 4:6-9

3 4:10



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