

Life Lesson 59
The Ark and the Idol
Text: I Samuel 4-6

Introduction

Hophni and Phinehas must not have been very smart! God had given them a message by little Samuel. They would be judged for their sin with a terrible punishment. Yet, they didn't change their ways at all. It must have been that they didn't truly believe God, or surely they would have quit doing those wicked things.

The Story

Hophni and Phinehas were the sons of Eli. They were priests and should have been an example to the rest of the nation. Instead, they were just as bad, if not worse, than the rest of the people. When people brought offerings to God, Hophni and Phinehas took the best parts for themselves. They broke all of God's commandments and cared nothing for God or for His people.

Many people are like that today. They know that God said in His Word that all sin must be punished. Those of us who are saved have had our punishment paid. Jesus already endured the wrath of God our sins deserved. Those who aren't saved will have to pay for their sins themselves. They don't believe God and keep going on their way, living only for themselves. One day they will have to face the music— just like Hophni and Phinehas did.

The Philistines began to fight against the Israelites again. Because the Israelites had forgotten God and were living sinful lives, God didn't help them in their battle. The Philistines killed about four thousand soldiers.

Instead of repenting and asking for God's help, the Israelites had another idea.

“Why isn't God helping us?” they whined. “Let's take the Ark of the Covenant with us into battle. Maybe the Ark will help us win the battle.”

The Ark was the special box built to hold the ten commandments God had given to His people. It also held some manna and other reminders of God's care for them in the wilderness. It was a very special box, but it was just a box. It wasn't a god and certainly could do nothing to deliver them from their enemies. The Israelites took an important reminder of God's care and made it into an idol and worshiped it! Now they expected it to save them.

I hope none of you here today are doing that same silly thing. I know none of you would worship a box or ask a box to help you. Many people do things just as foolish. They don't want to repent and give their lives to the true God, so they instead count on things like Baptism and church membership to save them.

Certainly, those who are saved should be baptized. It is an important reminder of what God has done for us. Does Baptism save us? No, of course not. It's Jesus who saves us.

Does God want His people to be members of a church? Of course He does! Does church membership save us? No, only Jesus can save us. When we depend on anything but Jesus, that thing becomes an idol to those foolish Israelites.

They soon learned their mistake. When they loaded it up and carried it into battle, the Israelites cried with joy and confidence of victory. The Philistines heard their cry and trembled with fear.

"Their God – the One who did so many things for them – has come into the camp to help them. We're doomed! Fight like men, because we don't have much hope!" the Philistines cried.

They fought, and to their surprise, they easily defeated the Israelites. That's because God wasn't on the side of the Israelites. He let them be defeated so they could learn to trust only Him.

Thirty thousand Israelites were killed. Among them were Hophni and Phinehas, those wicked priests. They didn't believe God would really judge them. They found out that God always does what He says He will do.

The Philistines were jubilant. They carried the Ark of the Covenant back to their city and put it in the temple of their god, Dagon. He was the ugly statue with a fish head on a man's body.

“Our god, Dagon is greater than the Israelite God,” they gloated.

God wanted the Philistines to understand that He was the only true God, even if His own people kept forgetting it. He made sure that everyone saw who was the real god.

The next morning when the Philistines came into the temple, they saw the Ark of the Covenant where they left it – and there was Dagon lying on the ground face-down before it.

They quickly put Dagon back on his feet. The next morning he was on his face again. This time his head, hands and feet were cut off. Only the stump of the statue was left.

God was getting a message to the people of Ashdod, the Philistine city where the Ark had been placed. Everyone who lived in and around the city were plagued with tumors. Many people died. Before long the people decided that they wanted the ark moved somewhere else.

But at the next city, Gath, the same thing happened. They were stricken with tumors, too. The Philistine lords got together and decided to send the Ark back to the Israelites.

They loaded the Ark on a cart and put offerings inside it of gold. They hitched two milk cows up to it and set the cows loose. The cows knew where to go, because God directed them. They headed straight back to the land of Israel.

The Israelites were so glad to have the ark back! They made an altar and offered a sacrifice to the Lord in thanksgiving for returning the ark to them safely.

The Life Lesson

What have we learned from our lesson today? I hope you've learned that we should worship and serve no one but the Lord. He is the only true God. And I hope you remember that God always does just what He says He will do.

Review Questions

Who were Hophni and Phinehas?

The sons of Eli.

Did they serve the Lord?

No, they were wicked.

Who attacked the Israelites at this time?

The Philistines

What foolish thing did the Israelites decide to do?

To take the Ark of the Covenant into battle with them.

Could the Ark of the Covenant save them?

No, only God could deliver them, not the box that represented His law.

Who won the battle?

The Philistines

What did the Philistines do with the Ark of the Covenant?

They put it in the temple with their god, Dagon.

What happened to Dagon.

They found him on the floor with his head, hands, and feet broken off.

What happened to the people in the city of Ashdod?

They became sick with tumors.

How did the Philistines send the Ark of the Covenant back?

They put in on a cart, hitched up two cows to it and turned it loose. The cows went straight back to Israel.