

## MESSAGE - Seeking God's Kingdom - Part 5 - "When God Left"

Earlier this week I saw that Mike and Marcia picked *O Come O Come Immanuel* as one of our worship songs. I'm familiar with it... I've probably sung it every year around Christmas time... but I couldn't tell you exactly what it's about.

But this week I learned that **it was originally not a song! It was a Latin prayer** from the 1100's AD. The English version that we sing comes from the 1800's... which is why there's a lot of Old English, King James-sounding words in there.

And so I was reading the lyrics, and one word in particular stuck out to me:

**[SLIDE 1] "O come Thou Dayspring come and cheer our spirits by Thine advent here. And drive away the shades of night. And pierce the clouds and bring us light."**

"Shades" stuck out to me because I knew it's a word the Old Testament uses for spirits of the dead. They're described as shadowy beings that exist in the realm of darkness, cut off from the presence of God.

Theologically speaking, the "shades" represent the spiritual world of death and God's absence. They symbolize the kind of darkness that stands against God's light.

**This is more than just a Christmas song! It's a *powerful* prayer!  
Here's what we're actually praying as we sing:**

- "*O come Thou Dayspring*" - Dayspring is a title for Jesus. He's the Light from heaven.
- "*Come and cheer our spirits by Thine advent here*" - Jesus is the light that comes to drive away darkness, which causes great joy, because He...
- "*drive(s) away the shades of night*" - In other words, Jesus pushes back against the powers of darkness that lead us away from Him.

When we sing this, we're asking the Light of the world to drive away the shades of night. We're crying out to Jesus and asking Him to push back things like fear,

confusion, hopelessness... really, *anything* that the powers of darkness use to blind us from His presence and peace.

This is a prayer that says: **“Lord, we need You. Come near to us again.”**

Most of us, if not all of us, have experienced extremely dark moments in our lives. Moments when God feels distant. Hope seems lost. And, if we're honest... It can even feel like darkness won.

**That's the essence of 1 Samuel chapter 4. In fact...**

**[SLIDE 2] 1 Samuel 4 is one of the darkest chapters in the entire book of Samuel.**

**It's dark because everything that could go wrong *does* go wrong:**

- Israel's army is crushed. Thirty thousand men fall in a single day.
- The priests who were supposed to lead the people into God's presence die on the battlefield.
- The ark of God is captured by the enemies of God.
- Samuel, the one glimmer of hope from chapter 3, isn't mentioned at all.
- And the chapter ends with a dying woman declaring: “Glory has departed from Israel.” In other words, God's presence has left them.

**Chapter 4 is a picture of what life looks like when the people of God try to move forward without the presence of God.**

Look at the first couple verses...

**[SLIDE 3] 1 Samuel 4:1-2 - Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek. The Philistines deployed their forces to meet Israel, and as the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand of them on the battlefield.**

We don't know exactly why the Israelites went out to fight, but it was probably because the Philistines were expanding their territory. But here's what we *do* know...

Israel didn't have an organized army. They had no king. No commander. Their "soldiers" were more like a group of farmers acting as a makeshift militia trying to protect their land.

They were outnumbered and outgunned.

And yet they still thought they'd win.

Why?

**Because they *assumed* the LORD was with them.**

...Which just shows how spiritually blind they were.

Remember, this was during a time when everyone did as they saw fit. They weren't seeking the LORD. They were worshiping other gods. They were committing all kinds of sin. And yet they thought they were safe simply because of their identity. They were Israel, Yahweh's nation!

But they were far from safe. Their disobedience led to severe consequences.

The book of Jeremiah actually looks back on this dark moment in Israel's history and uses it as a warning for Jeremiah's generation. The LORD said to His people...

**[SLIDE 4] Jeremiah 7:9-10 - "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things?"**

**[SLIDE 5] Jeremiah 7:12-13 - "Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel... I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen."**

**[SLIDE 6] Jeremiah 7:14-15 - "Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name... I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your fellow Israelites, the people of Ephraim."**

We're supposed to read this and think: *"This is just like it was back in Samuel's day, right before the fall of Shiloh."*

Again, Israel thought they were safe. At this point their sin was so normalized and accepted that they didn't realize God wasn't with them anymore.

So after they lost the first battle against the Philistines, the Israelite soldiers headed back to base camp. And when they arrived, the elders asked:

**[SLIDE 7] 1 Samuel 4:3 - “Why did the LORD bring defeat on us today?”**

At this point, the elders were the closest thing Israel had to leadership. These were the men who were *supposed* to guide the people toward the LORD. But instead of going to the LORD in prayer or asking for His direction, they decided to take matters into their own hands. They said...

**[SLIDE 8] 1 Samuel 4:3b - “Let us bring the ark of the LORD’s covenant from Shiloh, so that he may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies.”**

At first, this might sound like a good idea. After all, the ark represented God's presence among His people. In Scripture, it's called **God's footstool**. It's the place where His heavenly reign touched earth. It was supposed to be a visible reminder that God chose Israel as His nation.

And there were times in Israel's past when the ark was brought into battle, *but only when God instructed them to bring it, and only when His people were walking in obedience*. None of that happens here.

There's no prayer. No repentance. No one is seeking God. There's no word from the LORD. They didn't even ask Samuel! Which is *SHOCKING* because *everyone* recognized Samuel as a true prophet of the LORD! (1 Sam 3:20)

**There's no evidence that they were seeking to know God's will before they chose to go out in battle. The elders just *assumed* God would show up and save them if they carried the right object into battle.**

But that assumption was far more dangerous than we might realize. Because this wasn't an act of faith on their part... This was **ritual manipulation**. Instead of *seeking* God, they were trying to *use* God.

It reminds me of the **Tower of Babel** when the people said...

**[SLIDE 9] Genesis 11:4 - “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens...”**

In the ancient world, towers (ziggurats) were built so people could try to **control** the gods and manipulate them into doing what they wanted. This was actually at the heart of pagan worship. And in Samuel’s day, the nations around Israel were still doing this.

**Unfortunately, Israel fell into the same sin. Because by bringing the ark into battle, they were trying to manipulate Yahweh Himself.**

And if you know what happened at Babel, then you know it never goes well when people try to control God. Yahweh God, the Almighty Creator, cannot, and will not, be controlled.

And yet, the elders of Israel were doing what was right in their eyes.  
**They treated Yahweh God like any other little-g god...  
 which revealed just how far their hearts wandered from Him.**

And as we’ll see at the end of the chapter...

**[SLIDE 10] When God’s people stop seeking Him and start using Him, “The Glory” always departs.**

But again, they still didn’t realize that the LORD’s presence had left them.

So they sent some men to retrieve the ark from the Temple at Shiloh. They brought it back to the camp, along with two corrupt priests: Hophni and Phinehas (Eli’s two sons). And...

**[SLIDE 11] 1 Samuel 4:5 - When the ark of the LORD’s covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook.**

Again, they thought they were going to win. They *thought* Yahweh God was with them. Even the Philistines were afraid! Their panic is literally built into the Hebrew in this passage! Listen to this super literal translation...

**[SLIDE 12] 1 Samuel 4:7-8 - “And the Philistines were afraid and said, “A god has come into the camp!” And they said, “Woe to us! Never has this happened... yesterday or the day before! Woe to us! Who will rescue us**

**from the hand of the gods... the mighty ones... these? These — they are the gods! The ones striking Egypt with every plague in the wilderness!”**

Notice the panic in their voices. Their theology was a little fuzzy, but they remember enough history to be afraid.

And so while the Philistines were terrified, the Israelite camp was cheering. They convinced themselves that bringing the ark guaranteed an automatic win.

But they couldn't have been more wrong.

**[SLIDE 13] 1 Samuel 4:10-11 - So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.**

**This was a complete and total upset.** It was the kind of defeat that neither camp saw coming. The Philistines went into battle thinking they were going to die. The Israelites went into it thinking they couldn't lose.

Both assumptions were immediately shattered.

The deciding factor was that Yahweh was not with Israel.

And now more than 30 thousand Israelites were dead.

The ark of God was captured.

And the priests of God died on the same day...

just as Yahweh said it would happen.

And if that's not bad enough, it gets worse...

**[SLIDE 14] (Picture of the Benjamite and Eli)**

That same day, a man from the tribe of Benjamin broke away from the battlefield and ran all the way to Shiloh. His clothes are torn... dust is on his head... he looks battleworn. And he's got some terrible news.

When he got to Shiloh, he told everyone what happened and how Israel's army suffered heavy losses. When they heard this, everyone cried out. But Eli hadn't heard the news yet because he was sitting in his chair along the road, just outside of town. He was waiting to find out what happened to the ark... and he feared the worst.

But when he heard the uproar, he asked what all the commotion was about. So the Benjamite man ran over to Eli and gave him the news that Israel's army was devastated, Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas were dead, and the ark of God had been captured.

When Eli heard the ark had been captured, he was so upset that he fell backward off his chair, broke his neck, and died... which fulfilled what the LORD said would happen.

### **[SLIDE 15] (What about Samuel?)**

**Part of me wonders what Samuel was doing during all this.** We know he ministered everyday in the tabernacle. And with Eli's sons gone with the ark, Samuel may have been the one carrying out the regular duties that day.

And I'm guessing he heard the uproar. But I doubt Samuel panicked. He already knew judgment was coming. He knew the prophecy God had spoken against Eli's family. He knew both of Eli's sons would die on the same day.

So while Shiloh erupts in chaos and grief, Samuel may have simply realized: *"This is it. This is the day the LORD told me about."*

But, interestingly, Samuel doesn't appear in the story at all.

We don't hear about him again until chapter 7. That silence is intentional.

**Samuel's absence from the narrative symbolizes the LORD's absence from Israel.**

And while it seemed like no one knew why the LORD's judgement was on Israel, there was one woman in Shiloh who understood.

### **[SLIDE 16] (Picture of Eli's daughter-in-law)**

This is Eli's daughter-in-law. She's the wife (now widow) of Phinehas. And the moment she heard the news that the ark was captured, her husband and father-in-law were dead, she went into labor.

Unfortunately it wasn't going well. She was dying.

The women attending her tried to comfort her and said...

### **[SLIDE 17] 1 Samuel 4:20 - "Don't despair; you have given birth to a son."**

In other words: *Don't be afraid to die. Even though your husband and the men in your family have died, your family line will continue.*

And for ancient Israel, that mattered deeply.  
But she didn't care about that.

Because she knew this moment wasn't about her family line. It wasn't even about her personal loss. She understood that Israel had treated God *lightly*.

And so, she named her son [ee-ka-VOHD], which, in Hebrew, means: "no glory".

### [SLIDE 18] (Ichabod name meaning)

ee-ka-VOHD - or Ichabod - comes from the Hebrew word *kavod*, which carries the ideas of *weight, honor, and glory*.

But when you add the "i/ee" sound... *i-kavod*... it flips the meaning: *light, dishonored, no glory*.

And that meaning matters, because back in chapter 2, God gave a warning to Eli's household. He said...

**[SLIDE 19] 1 Samuel 2:30b - Those who honor [kavod] me I will honor [kavod], but those who despise me will be disdained [yeqallu].**

*yeqallu* means *to be treated lightly*. It's the opposite of *kavod*.

This warning has come true in chapter 4: Israel treated God lightly.  
And the name given to this child says exactly that: *Ichabod*.

The weight of honor and glory that God gave Israel is no longer there.  
We see this twice for emphasis in verses 21 and 22...

**[SLIDE 20] 1 Samuel 4:21 & 22 - "The Glory [kavod] has departed from Israel"**

Chapters 1-3 show God's presence with the faithful few.  
Chapter 4 shows God's absence from the unfaithful many.

This contrast is intentional.  
It's supposed to feel devastating—because that's exactly what it was.



And it's not like God was being harsh or unreasonable. He didn't go against His promises.

Like we talked about this last week, God had been incredibly patient with Israel. He gave them every opportunity to return to Him... But they just kept doing whatever they wanted.

So yes, the glory departed from Israel. But don't miss this...

**[SLIDE 21] Israel had departed from God long before God ever departed from them!**

That's why the name Ichabod is so tragic. **It symbolizes the reality that God's presence had left Israel.**

But that's *not* the end of the story!

Because centuries later, in another dark moment in Israel's history, another child was born: **Immanuel. His name means "God with us."**

**[SLIDE 22] (Ichabod = absence / Immanuel = presence)**

**Ichabod** is a reminder of what happens when we abandon God. **Immanuel** is a promise of what happens when we seek God: He comes near to us.

And if Ichabod represents God's absence, what happens when God's presence leaves? His **peace** leaves with Him.

Israel experienced this in chapter 4...  
*Panic - Confusion - Fear - Defeat - Death - Spiritual darkness.*  
**It's a picture of life without peace.**

But standing in contrast to Ichabod is *Immanuel*.

Isaiah 9 calls Him: Prince of Peace.  
His reign brings a peace that never ends.

**What does this tell us?**

**[SLIDE 23] Where God is present, peace is present. Because He Himself is our peace.<sup>1</sup>**

Advent reminds us that Jesus doesn't wait for our lives to be peaceful before He comes. Instead, when we seek Jesus, He steps into our chaos.

He enters into our darkness.

And His presence brings a peace that's beyond our understanding.  
It's a peace that the world can't truly promise or produce.

And so, think about those moments when life falls apart.

I know... that's hard.

But maybe you've felt the LORD's peace in those moments?

If you have, then you know it's hard to explain!  
Because His peace isn't the absence of chaos.  
It's the supernatural ability to *endure* in the midst of the chaos.

Because when the LORD gives us His peace, there's strength.  
There's comfort. There's even a... steadfastness...  
like being able to stand when normally you'd fall to the floor.

**That's the kind of peace the LORD gives.**  
And think about this...

**[SLIDE 24] When we feel His peace, that's a sign of His presence.**

---

<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 2:14

When we feel His peace, that's Him letting us know He's near.  
That's not to say if we don't feel His peace that He's not near...

Either way, Immanuel is the God who is with us.  
And to those that seek Him, He promises to be with us to the end of the age.

**But let's not forget the warning of chapter 4.**

Israel lost God's peace because they stopped seeking God's presence.  
They trusted in objects... in routines... in distractions...  
They trusted in anything but the Lord Himself.

And when we chase after lesser sources of peace...  
Things like comfort, possessions, achievement, or escape...  
we discover what Israel discovered:

**[SLIDE 25] There is no true peace without the presence of God.**

But when we turn to Him, even in the darkest valleys, His peace meets us with  
strength for today and hope for tomorrow.

Because "we may be hard pressed... but with Jesus, we are not crushed.  
We may be struck down... but with Jesus, we are not destroyed."<sup>2</sup>

In Jesus, there is life... life to the full.<sup>3</sup>  
In Jesus, the glory that once departed has returned.  
In Jesus, peace has come near.

So as we sing this next song, let it be our prayer:  
*Come Thou Long Expected Jesus...*  
*Let us find our rest in Thee...*

**Let's pray.**

---

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:8-9

<sup>3</sup> John 10:10