



Part 6: Stuck in Religious Rituals

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1 Samuel 4: The Story is Bad

Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek. ² 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. ³ When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, "Why did the Lord bring defeat on us today before the Philistines?"

The people of God lose

The people of God ask a logical question: why?

The people of God make a plan

³ "Let us bring the ark of the Lord's covenant from Shiloh, so that he/it may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies."

⁴ So the people sent men to Shiloh, and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the Lord Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim. And Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

The plan is simple: get the box and bring the big guns!

⁵ When the ark of the Lord's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. ⁶ Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, "What's all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?"

When they learned that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp, ⁷ the Philistines were afraid. "A god has come into the camp," they said. "Oh no! Nothing like this has happened before. ⁸ We're doomed! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. ⁹ Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!"

The enemy of God is scared of God

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

The people of God go into battle and they lose again

What happened?

The people of God mistook ritual for relationship

The people of God cared more about what they got from God than being in relationship with God.

The people of God played a game of religious ritual that ended up in defeat and disappointment.

The ark remained at Kiriath Jearim a long time—twenty years in all. –1 Samuel 7:2

**For 20 years, the people of God are stuck in defeat and disappointment.
And then...**

Then all the people of Israel turned back to the Lord. So Samuel said to all the Israelites, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.” So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the Lord only. – 1 Samuel 7:2-4

Baal: god of success

Ashtoreth: goddess of sexuality

How do you break the cycle of religious ritual?

You return to God’s heart (verse 2)

You rid yourself of your “gods” (verse 3)

You re-evaluate your rituals (verse 3-4)

You resolve to honor your most important relationship (verse 4)

Next Step

One definition of ritual is *a series of actions or type of behavior regularly and invariably followed by someone*. Take some time this week to think and pray about things you might repeatedly do in order to be “right with God.” Ask God to show you which of those rituals strengthen your relationship with him and which rituals end up replacing your relationship with him.

If God reveals a “dead” ritual to you, ask him for the power and resolve to rid yourself of that practice. He doesn’t expect you to fix it on your own, but has given you the Holy Spirit to walk with you through the process.

Small Group Questions

- 1) Are you competitive? How do you respond when you lose?
- 2) When was the last time you asked the question “Why?” Did the answer to the question satisfy your need for an answer?
- 3) List some godly rituals. How do you know when a ritual has crossed the line and is actually eroding your relationship with God?
- 4) The gods of success and sexuality are pervasive in our culture. How can a follower of Jesus thrive in a world devoted to these little gods?
- 5) What “gods” do you need to rid yourself of? What would it look like for you to resolve to honor the one true God?
- 6) What do you need prayer for today?