

OpenTheo

July 13th: 1 Samuel 4 & 1 Corinthians 13

July 13, 2020



Alastair Roberts

The Battle of Aphek. The way of love.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

1 Samuel chapter 4 And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek.

The Philistines drew up in line against Israel. And when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.

So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the Ark of the Covenant of God. As soon as the Ark of the

Covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded.

And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean? And when they learned that the Ark of the Lord had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid, for they said, A god has come into the camp. And they said, Woe to us, for nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness.

Take courage and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men and fight. So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled every man to his home.

And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell, and the Ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died. A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head. When he arrived, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the Ark of God.

And when the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out. When Eli heard the sound of the outcry he said, What is this uproar? Then the man hurried and came and told Eli. Now Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes were set so that he could not see.

And the man said to Eli, I am he who has come from the battle. I fled from the battle today. And he said, How did it go, my son? He who brought the news answered and said, Israel has fled from before the Philistines, and there has also been a great defeat among the people.

Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the Ark of God has been captured. As soon as he mentioned the Ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years.

Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. And when she heard the news that the Ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. And about the time of her death, the women attending her said to her, Do not be afraid, for you have born a son.

But she did not answer or pay attention. And she named the child Ichabod, saying, The glory has departed from Israel, because the Ark of God had been captured, and because of her father-in-law and her husband. And she said, The glory has departed from Israel,

for the Ark of God has been captured.

The first sentence of 1 Samuel chapter 4 concludes the narrative of the preceding chapter. Samuel is established as a prophet of the Lord, but now he drops out of the picture for the rest of the chapter, and for the chapters that follow, which concern Israel and Eli's house. Later he will reappear in a story that can be compared and contrasted with this story of the battle of Aphek, the story of the battle of Ebenezer in chapter 7. Ebenezer, meaning rock of help, is mentioned at the beginning of this story as the place where the Israelites camp.

However, there is no Ebenezer for Israel in this battle. This is all taking place in the west of the hill country of Ephraim. It is almost certainly also taking place during Samson's lifetime.

There is an overlap between the book of Judges and the book of 1 Samuel. Having sustained some serious losses, the elders of Israel send for the Ark. They seem to have an important ruling function alongside the Judges in Israel at this time, presumably representing the congregation.

The Ark was the footstool of God's throne. The Lord is enthroned above the cherubim. This is a repeated expression found in 2 Samuel 6 2 2 Kings 19 15 1 Chronicles 13 6 Psalms 80 1 99 1 Isaiah 37 16.

The Lord's presence is associated with the cherubim and the cherubim are associated with this object, the Ark of the Covenant. The mercy seat that was placed above the Ark of the Covenant included two cherubim. Israel thinks that by bringing this throne, as it were, of the Lord into the battle, that they can treat it like a talisman.

God will act on behalf of them because they have brought his footstool into the battle. They want the Ark to deliver them. The Lord for them can be manipulated by this box.

It's a fetishized object. The Ark of the Covenant is something that allows you to control God, to pull his strings. Essentially, it's acting as a sort of idol.

The Ark had been taken around Jericho and in that story there was a great shout and they brought the walls down with the shout and it initially looks similar. The Ark of the Covenant comes into the camp, there's a great shout, the Philistines are afraid and it looks like the tide of the battle has turned but things work out very differently. The Philistines wonder at the meaning of the shouting and they learn that the Ark has entered into the camp.

A god has joined the Hebrews and this is presumably one of the gods who struck the Egyptians. In Genesis chapter 10, the Philistines are associated with the Egyptians and they have clearly heard the story of the Exodus and all the things that were involved there. Even centuries later, the stories are still being told and the question here seems to

be who will serve whom.

There are two nations struggling for dominance and whichever wins this battle will make the others their servants. Fearful and desperate, the Philistines are called to act like men, to courageously fight what might be their last stand and they fight hard and utterly defeat the Israelites. The Israelites scatter, they don't just retreat as a military force, they flee to their homes.

The military force has been disbanded. The Ark is then captured and the two sons of Eli are killed, fulfilling the prophecy that was given by the man of God to Eli. A Benjaminite runs from battle, there's been speculation that this was Saul.

Perhaps it sets us up for the events that come later in the story of the kingdom being established through Saul. Eli is seated, he's concerned for the Ark. Perhaps he's seated on his seat of office at the gates of the city.

Eli, like the Philistines earlier, wonders at the reason for the outcry. Perhaps we are to associate Eli with the Philistines at this point. He is however especially concerned for the Ark of God and it is at the news of its loss that he falls over backwards and dies.

He's described as being very heavy and old. The chapter ends with death. This is similar to the death of Rachel in Genesis chapter 35 verses 17 to 18 as she dies giving birth to Benjamin.

And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, do not fear for you have another son. And as her soul was departing, for she was dying, she called his name Ben-Oni, but his father called him Benjamin. Perhaps there's also a contrast to be observed between Hannah and the mother of Ichabod.

In many respects, this could be read as the end of an old covenant order. After the capture of the Ark, the tabernacle worship was never truly restored again. The tabernacle and the Ark would always be separate, a broken house of the Lord, until the Ark was finally brought into the temple.

Phineas's wife dying in childbirth is another sign of the desolation of Israel. She names her son Ichabod inglorious because the glory has been exiled from Israel. The Ark of the Covenant, the throne chariot of the Lord, upon which the glory of the Lord rode, had been taken away from the nation.

On the other hand, the Lord had entered into exile for his people. The story of the Mosaic tabernacle order began with the death of two sons of the high priest. And here it ends with the death of the two sons of the high priest.

At the end of chapter four, we see the complete destruction of the house of Israel. The high priest has died, as have his two sons, devastating the priestly house and lineage.

The house of the Lord, the tabernacle, has been, as it were, torn in two with the Ark taken into captivity.

And the house of Israel has been ravaged by their enemies and has lost 30,000 men in not just a great defeat, but an event of national apostasy, akin to that with the golden calf at Sinai. A question to consider. What are some ways in which we might seek to manipulate and control God as Israel tried to do with the Ark of the Covenant in this chapter? 1 Corinthians chapter 13.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away.

As for tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians chapter 13 is one of the most familiar texts in all of Paul, and yet for this very reason, one of the most misunderstood.

It is a text that is often read as an enconium to romantic love at weddings, but as usual, it belongs firmly in its context. It is in the middle of an argument. This chapter is part of the argument about spiritual gifts and its purpose is to put the practice of the spiritual gifts in the appropriate place.

Love isn't so much an alternative to the spiritual gifts as the way in which all such gifts must be exercised. Paul has previously spoken about the importance and primacy of the way of love in 1 Corinthians chapter 8 verse 1. Now concerning food offered to idols, we know that all of us possess knowledge. This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

So Paul talking about the importance of love at this point is not a new theme in his letter. This chapter identifies the precise antidote to the Corinthians' inappropriate spirituality. It is an integral part of Paul's larger argument, but it is also a praise of love, an expression of its superlative character.

Love is that which must govern everything, all expressions of the Christian life and practice. By describing and praising love, Paul exposes the problems of the Corinthians and he offers an alternative model for them to pursue. It begins with the absolute necessity of love in the first three verses, then describes the glories of love in verses 4 to 7, its characteristics and its traits, and in verses 8 to 13 it contrasts the spiritual gifts and their provisional character to the enduring nature of love.

This love, of course, then is not romantic sentimentality or love as such, but it is a love that follows the pattern of Christ's own love. Love, Paul argues, is indispensable. Even the most elevated and remarkable spiritual gifts and practices, practiced apart from love, are worse than empty.

Without love, being able to speak by the spirit not just in human tongues but also supposedly in angelic tongues, will be of no greater value than the sort of instruments that one finds in pagan worship, noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. The Corinthians prided themselves on their spiritual knowledge, yet that too is worthless apart from love. Love, as Paul has argued in chapter 8, is how we know things truly.

Supposing we had faith sufficient to remove mountains, here Paul alludes to Matthew chapter 17 verse 20, For truly I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, Move from here to there, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you. Even if they have that sort of faith, in the absence of love they are nothing. Let us suppose that they sell all their worldly goods and give them to the poor.

That too gains them nothing without love. At this point in the text there is debate over whether we should read deliver up my body to be burned or deliver up my body in order that I may boast. It may be a reference to martyrdom, perhaps giving oneself into slavery for Christ.

Yet even the most extreme self-sacrifice is worthless apart from love. Paul now moves to describe love's defining traits, clearly contrasting with the behaviour of the Corinthians to this point. Love is patient.

Patience is absolutely essential when dealing with others. Without patience little can be accomplished. Patience is taking time with people.

Patience is giving time to people. Patience is making time for people. Patience is choosing your time with people.

This is the behaviour of love. Love is kind. It's generous, benevolent, noble.

It's an active alternative to anger and resentment. It breaks their cycles. It interrupts them and starts something new.

Love does not envy. It's not caught up in the status-seeking and the quest to pursue advantage over others that was so characteristic of the Corinthians. It does not boast.

You could think of the Corinthians' slogans and their claims for themselves that they rule like kings. Theirs was a form of spirituality that boasted in status and over others. Love is not arrogant.

It does not seek or inflate its own importance as the Corinthians did. Their brand of knowledge puffed up in pride. But love is of a very different character.

Love is not rude. It's mindful of the manner in which it treats others. It's concerned for appropriate social order and propriety.

We might think of the rudeness of the Corinthians and their behaviour at the table of the Lord. They're dishonouring, neglect and despising of each other. We might also think about Paul's teaching about head coverings.

People who want to express their own authority and their own freedom could act in a way that dishonoured their head, that dishonoured themselves and also dishonoured others. Love is courteous. It honours decorum and politeness.

We'll see this even more in the chapter that follows. Love does not insist on its own way. Love does not revolve around its own interests.

It's prepared to surrender its rights for others. Love becomes all things to all men. Love is prepared to make sacrifices for the weaker brother.

Love is prepared to abstain from exercising rights that might wound others. Love is not irritable or resentful. It's not easily provoked to anger or bitterness.

Its lack of preoccupation with its own rights allows it to suffer wrong without reacting out of grievance, wounded pride, vengefulness or entitlement. Such love would not be given to the litigious behaviour that the Corinthians were given to in chapter 6. Love doesn't keep score. How often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Love isn't preoccupied with such questions.

Love does not tally up those petty grudges in its mental register, the ways that in our status seeking we try and put ourselves ahead of others or reckon their debt to us. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing. It grieves at the sin of the man in a relationship with his father's wife.

We can so often delight in other people's failings and sins. We see our enemy fall into sin and we rejoice. It enables us to feel superior and self-righteous.

We gossip about other people's sins, sharing them as if they were a matter of entertainment. Love however wishes what is good, in our own lives, in the lives of our enemies. Love rejoices in the truth.

It's not about self-interest. It's about something that stands over against us, the truth itself. Love desires and rejoices in integrity.

Truth never tidily aligns with our personal interests. But love wants to know the truth. It isn't defensive before the truth.

It lets its own interests be compromised for the sake of something greater, the truth itself. Love bears all things. Love is that which never ceases to support.

It keeps holding up relationships with others, even under the greatest burden and pressure. Love believes all things. It believes through all things.

It never surrenders faith. Not in human goodness, but in God. It perseveres with people, even when it might seem that they are beyond recovery.

Love hopes all things. It never despairs of people or situations. Love endures all things.

It never gives up on or abandons people. Love is permanent in a way that the spiritual gifts are not. They are transitory.

The fact that Paul is speaking into the Corinthian context is very clear here. Prophecies, tongues and knowledge are temporary and partial. When the fullness of revelation comes, spiritual gifts will pass away.

These sign gifts are primarily for the purpose of attesting the truth of the gospel as it is first preached. As time goes on, they become less prominent. The Corinthians who think that they already reign, and have little sense of the not yet of the gospel, struggle to perceive the temporary character of the spiritual gifts.

The time will come when those gifts will fade or pass away. When they pass away, they will be replaced by something greater. Paul seems to allude to Numbers 12, verses 6-8.

The contrast between the faint and limited revelation that Aaron and Miriam and others had, and that enjoyed by Moses. And he said, Hear my words. If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision.

I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house.

With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles. And he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? Love is unique in the fact that it endures into the age to come.

Faith, hope and love are the Christian virtues. They are listed on several occasions in Paul. He explores their interrelationship in a number of different ways.

For instance, in Romans 5, verses 1-5. And character produces hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Galatians 5, verses 5-6. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

The spiritual gifts may be the scaffolding, but love is the mortar of the building of the church. The gifts and the manifestations will one day be removed, but what will be left is the love by which the building is established. A question to consider.

Chapter 12 ends with the words, and I will show you a still more excellent way. This looks forward to the argument of chapter 13. How can the argument of chapter 13 be tied closely into the argument of chapter 12? In what respect does it represent a more excellent way than something in chapter 12?