

We all want to have God on our side. In this chapter we see the children of Israel attempt and fail to enlist God in a battle against the Philistines.

We know, of course, that God is always with us and always desiring our good. “I will never leave you nor forsake you,” He promises.

But sometimes we want the Lord to rescue us out of a difficulty of our own making. Moses finds himself in this situation in Numbers 14 when the Lord is angry with the nation of Israel. Look how Moses intercedes: “Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, ‘It is because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he has killed them in the wilderness.’” Moses has a lot of nerve. He is essentially saying, “If You give these people the punishment they deserve, it will make You look bad.” But the Lord does relent, in part. He spares the Israelites’ lives but sentences them to wander the wilderness for a generation.

Questions for study and discussion:

1. Does the Lord tell the Israelites through Samuel to go out to battle the Philistines?
2. What is the intention of the Israelites in bringing the ark to the battlefield?
3. Why do Hophni and Phinehas accompany the ark? Is this pleasing to God?

God does not want His people, those who bear His name, to come into shame. Nor those who bear His Son’s name. He may well pull us as Christians out of a pit we ourselves have dug, for His Name’s sake alone and for no merit of ours.

But God is holy. He will not permit His name to be associated with what is disgraceful and dishonoring to Him. That is why some believers have “fallen asleep” in 1 Corinthians 11. That is why the assembly at Ephesus is near to losing their testimony in Revelation 2:5. It is not a question of losing salvation; it is God preserving His name and His glory in the face of our presumption, as He does in this chapter.

If we remain humble and repent when we know we should, we can say with confidence, “Be still my soul, the Lord is on thy side.”

Notes

4:4 The ark was topped with two cherubim (winged angelic beings). The Lord spoke to Moses from this spot.

4:21 Ichabod means “no glory.”

4. When the Philistines hear of the ark, they are at first dismayed as many of Israel's enemies have been up until now (c.f. Joshua 2:11). But they quickly rally and take courage. Why?
5. Why would the Lord allow His people to be defeated and His ark, His mercy seat, to be captured?
6. Which news affects Eli more, the loss of his sons or the loss of the ark? What does that tell us about Eli?
7. Where else in scripture does the glory depart from the temple? Why?