

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
Paul Gunn, Pastor

Lost and Found Series, Sermon #3

Sermon Title: What To Do When God Seems Lost: The Story of the Lost Ark of the Covenant, I Samuel 4, 5, 6

Date preached: September 17, 2017

For public use: See non-copyright comments at the end of message

INTRODUCTION: There are two points to my message today:

1. When God seemed lost, he was at work in a new way.
2. When God seemed lost, some were faithful; some were not.

Two weeks ago, I started a series called “Lost and Found.” The first message was the story of the ax head that floated. A lumber jack was working one day when he lost his ax head. I called the ax head “the cutting edge” and used that story to share with you what to do when you’ve lost your cutting edge.

Then, last week I shared the story of Jonah—lost at sea. Jonah was determined to do it his way, but God had other plans. In the end, Jonah delivered God’s message but wasn’t happy with the outcome. The city of Nineveh repented, so God spared them, and Jonah was not happy about it.

I hope today’s message will intrigue you to think deeper about your relationship with God. There may be times in our lives when we feel closer to God than other times. And, there are times when we wonder if our prayers are bouncing off the ceiling. I’m a bit leery of people who always have spiritual answers for everything. They are either super saints or imposters.

As the common, everyday person I am, I can honestly say, while I always feel the presence of God, there are times when I feel closer to him than others. There are times when sermons come together quite easily, but most of the time, putting together a Sunday message or midweek Bible study is completely exhausting.

There are times I feel quite confident about God's will, and there are times when I feel he wants me to work a jigsaw puzzle, only to find out there are some missing parts. A thousand-piece puzzle is a failure if one piece is missing. If you want a pastor who has an answer for every situation, you'll have to find someone else. I'm just being honest with you.

In today's message, we have an interesting situation. The Ark of the Covenant was stolen by the enemy of the Israelites. Before I get into the message, let me give you some background about the Ark. It wasn't an Ark like Noah's Ark. It was a large container the Israelites carried around. It was a sacred object that could not be touched.

Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai in the literal presence of God which, was described as thick cloud of darkness. God told Moses what he wanted the tabernacle to look like and what it was to be furnished with. He was also given the furnishings for the Ark.

- In American dimensions, the Ark was approximately 52" x 31" x 31".
- The Ark was build out of wood and covered with gold.
- Inside the Ark was a gold pot of manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments.
- On each corner was a gold ring, and long, gold covered wooden rods were inserted in the rings.
- It had a golden lid with two golden cherubim statues on top of it. Cherubim are holy creatures who praise God. There are various descriptions of them in the Bible.
- Between the lid and the cherubim was a space where God appeared.
- Anyone who touched the Ark died.

The Ark was carried through the 40 years of wilderness wandering. It went before them in their travels and during war. When the portable tabernacle was erected, it was placed in a separate area called the Holy of Holies. Only one time per year could the Holy of Holies be entered. That day was called the Day of Atonement when the High Priest offered a sacrifice for all the sins of the people.

As modern-day believers, this is all a mystery to us. We can only imagine what it looked like and the significance it served.

The New Testament book of Hebrews, written centuries later, tells us the Ark, the tabernacle, the priest, and all the rituals were shadows of things to come. The reason I shared all of this with you is to set the stage for the rest of the message. The Ark was not God, but it represented God. It represented his holiness, his power, and his power to forgive.

The Ark was a mainstay in the lives of many generations of Israelites. They didn't remember a time before the Ark, and they could not imagine a time without it. They always knew its location. In time, as the Israelites settled in the Promised Land, the Ark found a permanent location in Shiloh. And, as we enter today's story, the Ark had been in a city called Shiloh for long time—several hundred years.

In I Samuel 4, The Israelites went into battle against the Philistines, and they were defeated. The elders decided to go to Shiloh to get the Ark of the Covenant and take it into battle. It had been many years since this had happened.

SCRIPTURE: I Samuel 4:5-11 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!"

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.*

EXPLANATION: As a side note, Hophni and Phinehas were wicked sons of Eli the priest. The scripture tells us Eli died when he heard the news that the Ark was stolen, and a woman giving birth died when she heard the news as well. No news

could have been worse for the Israelites than losing the Ark. To them it was like losing God himself.

First, WHEN GOD SEEMED LOST, HE WAS AT WORK IN A NEW WAY.

EXPLANATION: The Ark represented joy and security to the Israelite people, and when it was gone, no doubt they felt the ultimate insecurity. To the Israelites, God seemed lost. Where was he? What was he doing? Were the Philistines abusing him? How would they function without him?

To the Philistines, the Ark was a mystery, but they thought they could manipulate it to their advantage. They put the Ark their temple next to a statue of their god, Dagon. The next morning, they discovered Dagon on the floor, so they propped him back up. In the morning, they discovered Dagon on the floor again but this time he'd fallen apart.

They became afraid and moved the Ark to a town called Gath. Their city went into a panic, and everyone was afflicted with tumors. They sent the Ark to a city called Ekron. Read with me in I Samuel 5.

SCRIPTURE: I Samuel 5:11-12 ¹¹ *So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and said, "Send the ark of the god of Israel away; let it go back to its own place, or it will kill us and our people." For death had filled the city with panic; God's hand was very heavy on it.* ¹² *Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven.*

EXPLANATION: The Philistines had seven months of misery and decided to return the Ark to the Israelites.

APPLICATION: Listen carefully because I want you to get it. If there is a time when God doesn't seem very near, understand he is still at work but in a new way you don't recognize. In today's story, God was whipping up on the Israelite's enemies.

If you don't sense God's presence maybe he's whipping up on your enemies. When I say "enemies" that's a rather strong word because we tend to think in terms of

making peace with our enemies. So, let's consider the word "enemy" to be any force working against us. In the Biblical narrative, we find later the Philistines were so demoralized and weak they were defeated by the Israelites, never to war against them again. Why? Because when they stole the Ark, God punished them.

Consider crafting a prayer for the times you don't feel God is near. "Dear God, I know you are near, even though I sense distance. You must be working in a way I do not see. Please open my eyes. I know you have not forgotten me. I know you have good plans for me. I know that you are out there, preparing a future for me and removing obstacles so I will have a good future."

Second, WHEN GOD SEEMED LOST, SOME WERE FAITHFUL, SOME WERE NOT.

The number one most precious item among a whole race of people was taken from them. What would happen to the Day of Atonement? How would their sins be forgiven? Would they all die in their sins? How would they make it another day? No doubt they must have felt terribly insecure.

We only have three clues as to how the people behaved while God seemed lost for seven months. I'll tell you two of them now and the third in a minute.

Clues 1 and 2 are found in I Samuel 6.

SCRIPTURE: I Samuel 6:13-14 ¹³ *Now the people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting their wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they rejoiced at the sight. ¹⁴ The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and there it stopped beside a large rock. The people chopped up the wood of the cart and sacrificed the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD.*

EXPLANATION: The first clue is the people were harvesting wheat. This means after the Ark was stolen, they went ahead with their daily routine. They farmed. They didn't just sit there and die. They knew there was a future, so they went ahead with their lives. The second clue is they were glad to see the Ark, which means they had not abandoned their faith.

After the Ark was stolen, the sun came up the next day, and they realized life would go on. During this time, they had to trust in God in a new way. They no longer had the physical reminder of the presence of God. Those who were strong in their faith no doubt knew God was at work among his people and had to think of him in broader terms. They had to trust him to be at work among them even though they could not see the item on which his presence dwelt. In a manner of speaking, he was no longer the God who lived in a box.

With no possibility of the Day of Atonement, they had to trust God—that he knew their sins and would forgive repentant hearts. Forgiveness of their sins would have to be rolled forward to some future date when they could be forgiven.

And, they must have realized the Ark was not God but represented God. And, they realized the Ark's holiness provided a place for God's Spirit to dwell. I may be stretching it a bit, but the deeply spiritual ones must have realized no one person's heart could be pure enough for God's Spirit to dwell like his Spirit dwelt on the mercy seat of the Ark. And, then, as the Book of Hebrews tells us, the shadow of things to come must have hit them. They needed a Messiah, someone who would save them from their sins because they could not save themselves.

We have a third clue as to what some did while it seemed God was lost. In I Samuel 7, we see something else which happened when the Ark was returned.

SCRIPTURE: I Samuel 7:2-4 ²*Then all the people of Israel turned back to the LORD.* ³*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."* ⁴*So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only.*

However, not everyone remained faithful to God during the time he seemed lost.

APPLICATION: Here's the application. As believers, there are things that help us in our Christian walk—our Bibles, church, teaching, preaching, fellowship among believers, a special person who set the example for you, whatever. Perhaps some of you have a cross in your pocket or on a necklace—symbols of God's presence.

Perhaps you consider your job a godsend, and you thank him all the time for it...or maybe it's a friend or spouse.

How would you live out your faith if something important to you were taken from you? What if God seemed lost? Would you abandon God altogether? Would you be disappointed in God? Or, would you learn to trust him in a new way and despite the losses? Would your threshold of faith be raised?

CONCLUSION: When God may seem lost, he's not lost. He's just working in a way you've not seen before. And, he might be revealing himself to you in a new or different way. He wants to broaden your faith so you see him at work in your life and in the world in ways you've never seen before.

To preachers, teachers, students, and anyone else reading or using this message: I have posted this for all to use as you see fit. There is no need to cite me as the source. You are free to delete sections, add your own, or do whatever you want. There is no copyright. My request is that you do not copyright or sell my work. I am sharing my preaching notes in good faith with you because I know the challenges of putting together a lesson, especially when your week gets consumed with other things. Use it and enjoy!

I use the NIV translation of scripture because of its conversational nature. Feel free to go to Bible Gateway and copy and paste whichever translation you want to use. This transcript has been edited to an outline format that improves readability and therefore may not exactly follow the video edition.

Find me at www.thbc.com Click on sermons or YouTube channel: Pastor Paul Gunn
Thanks to Judy Andrews and Nancy Claire Smith for their editing assistance.

Sincerely, Paul Gunn
Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
Nashville, Tennessee
USA