

Good morning! Most of us have things in our lives that are symbols of God's presence with us. We see lots of religious art; people wear crosses, or have bible verses on their walls. These things can be good reminders of the grace of Jesus. I wear a ring with a Christian symbol---a fish---on it, not as a reminder but as a conversation piece. People sometimes ask about it and then I can use their question to talk with them about Jesus. These religious symbols are meaningful to us--but they are no substitute for a fresh, ongoing relationship with God. Christians can lose their freshness and begin to run on a record---"I came to Christ in 1971 so everything's OK between God and me." That doesn't always work out the way we want! This morning, let's take a look at how this worked during one Old Testament event.

As the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth resounded. When the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, "What does the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" Then they understood that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp. The Philistines were afraid, for they said, "God has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who shall deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who smote the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. Take courage and be men, O Philistines, or you will become slaves to the Hebrews, as they have been slaves to you; therefore, be men and fight." So the Philistines fought and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent; and the slaughter was very great, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

**1 Sam. 4:5-11**

What an interesting passage! We read that the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the camp of the Israelites amid the Israelites' thundering cheers. For the Israelites, the presence of the ark signified that God would be with them--it was like their "nuclear option". The Philistines were finally going to really get what was coming to them! The ground was shaking; the Israelites were encouraged... and the Philistines were terrified. Everybody--including the Philistines--- thought that now those Philistines were in for a

good thrashing! The horrified Philistines knew that this could be the end. They didn't want to be enslaved so they encouraged each other to fight as hard as they could. And then ...the Philistines won. What? Yes, the Philistines killed thirty thousand Israelites, routed the rest, and captured the ark. Can you imagine this? A battle using hand weapons in which thirty thousand men were killed? How could this happen? They had the ark! The ark did not help the Israelites that day. They had a symbol of their God but they didn't have God with them. For all of our religious stuff, if we don't have a fresh, active relationship with God we cannot expect His help in fighting our battles. This morning, I want to encourage you to seek God. He will be with you...if you will be with Him!