

Church Group Discussion Guide

1 Samuel 4–6 — “What Kind of Religion Does God Reject?”

Big idea: God’s holiness cannot be contained, manipulated, or ignored. Every group in these chapters tried to relate to God on their own terms, and every group discovered that God will not be reduced. Ultimately, these chapters point us to Jesus, the One who bore the full weight of God’s holiness for us, so that we could draw near.

LEADER FRAMING

Tonight is not about getting through every question, but about making room for God’s Word to meet us.

Some of us may come in feeling close to God. Some may feel like God has been distant or confusing, and some may not be sure what they believe about God at all, and that’s okay.

As we cover 1 Samuel 4–6, let’s pay attention to what stands out, what feels confusing, what feels uncomfortable, and what God might be inviting us to consider.

Before we talk, let’s take a moment to slow down and ask God to help us listen.

Opening Prayer: “Lord, would you quiet our hearts enough to hear from you? And would you help this group be a safe place to be honest, curious, and open to what you want to show us through your Word?”

OPENING CONNECTION

Starting light and relational before moving deeper.

1. If you had to describe your relationship with “rules” or “traditions” growing up, whether in your home, church, or school, how would you describe it? Did they feel meaningful, burdensome, confusing, or something else?
2. When life gets busy or hard, do you find yourself drawing closer to God, pulling away, or just going through the motions? You can answer generally or personally.

SCRIPTURE READING

Read 1 Samuel 4:1–11; 5:1–4; 6:19–20

Invite someone to read the passages aloud slowly.

Then ask:

3. What word, phrase, or moment stood out to you as we listened? No need to explain it fully yet.
4. Was there anything in the passage that felt surprising, uncomfortable, or confusing?
5. What do you notice about the different groups in the story — the Israelites, the Philistines, and the Levites, and how each of them related to the ark?

HEAD — WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

These three chapters feel strange to modern readers. A statue falls down twice and breaks its own neck. People are struck with tumors and then death. A sacred box seems to move across the landscape with a power of its own.

But underneath the strangeness is a clear and consistent theme: **God's holiness is not manageable.** Every group in these chapters tried to use, contain, or casually approach God on their own terms. Every group discovered that God will not be domesticated.

The sermon identified three forms of religion God rejects:

- *Superficial Religion — using God as a tool when you need something, without genuinely seeking Him.*
- *Pick-and-Choose Religion — blending God into a life and belief system you have already decided on.*
- *Casual Religion — growing so familiar with sacred things that you lose your reverence entirely.*

And yet, even in judgment, the story does not end with God defeated. The ark in enemy territory is not God in captivity, but instead it's God on the move.

Discussion Questions

6. The Israelites went to get the ark during a military crisis. What do you think they believed the ark would do for them? Does that instinct feel familiar in any way?

Normalize the human impulse to reach for God in a crisis without having walked with Him beforehand.

7. The Philistines set the ark beside their god Dagon, as if God of Israel could simply be added to their existing religious system. What does it look like today when people try to add Jesus to a life they have already decided to live?
8. The Levites were the ones who knew better. They had the most training and the most responsibility. Why do you think familiarity with sacred things sometimes produces less reverence rather than more?
9. What does it mean that Dagon, the Philistine god, ended up prostrate before the ark? What is the story showing us about who God is?

Group Interaction Prompt

- Take a minute and let a few people respond to this: What did someone else say that helped you see the passage more clearly? This helps the group listen to one another, not just answer the leader.

HEART — WHAT SHOULD I FEEL, LONG FOR, OR WRESTLE WITH?

Each group in these chapters tried to relate to God in a way that was really about themselves. Their needs, their systems, their comfort, and in each case, God's response was not to accommodate them. It was to reveal Himself as He actually is: holy, uncontainable, and unwilling to share His glory.

That can feel alarming, but it is also, in a strange way, is good news. A God who can be controlled, domesticated, or fit into our preferences is not actually a God at all.

The question these chapters leave us with is not simply “what did they do wrong?” The question is: In what ways have I reduced God?

Discussion Questions

10. When you hear the phrase “the fear of the Lord,” what comes to mind? Does it feel like something healthy or something threatening? Has your sense of it changed over time?

11. Pastor Mike said: “When your sin feels safe to you, it is because you have lost the sense of God’s holiness.” Does that land as convicting, clarifying, confusing, or something else?

This does not have to be personal yet. What do you think is generally true about that statement?

12. Is there a version of God you have been tempted to prefer? Maybe one who is more comfortable, more affirming, or less demanding than the God in this passage? What does it feel like to sit with that honestly?

13. The story ends with what looks like God’s defeat, the ark captured, and carried off by enemies. But it turns out to be the beginning of victory. Where in your own life have you experienced something that looked like loss, but turned out to be something else?

Give people room to say they have not experienced this, or are still waiting.

HANDS — WHAT MIGHT TRUSTING OBEDIENCE LOOK LIKE?

None of the groups in these chapters were destroyed because God was cruel. They were undone by their own reduction of Him. And in each case, the consequence was a loss — of people, of peace, of presence.

The invitation from these chapters is not dramatic. It is not: “Go do something big.” It is closer to: “Stop treating God as small.”

For most of us, that begins quietly — in private honesty, in the habits of our ordinary days, in the places where we have let familiarity replace reverence.

Discussion Questions

14. Samuel, in chapter 3, was faithful in ordinary responsibilities before God called him to something more public. What are some everyday places where reverence for God is actually formed? Think about home, work, relationships, prayer, how we spend money, how we talk about people.

15. Why do we often underestimate the spiritual significance of ordinary faithfulness?

16. What is the difference between trying to manage God and actually trusting Him? What does each one feel like from the inside?

17. How does Jesus change the way we respond to this passage? The Israelites, Philistines, and Levites all failed to relate rightly to God’s holiness. Jesus didn’t, and he bore it fully, and he satisfied it completely. So our response to God’s holiness is not to live in fear of being struck down, but to receive what Jesus has already done, and let that change how we live.

PRACTICE: A SIMPLE PRAYER OF HONESTY

Before we take a moment of quiet, it may be helpful to say this clearly: when we talk about approaching a holy God, we are not talking about earning access. We already have access in Christ. The invitation is not to make ourselves worthy. It is to come honestly, without pretending, without performing, without reducing God to what we want Him to be.

Give the group 60–90 seconds of quiet.

Invite everyone to sit with this question (again if they were present on Sunday):

“In what ways have I reduced God?”

Then say: You might bring one of these honestly before God:

1. Lord, where have I been treating You like a resource rather than a Person?
2. Lord, where have I been picking and choosing what I want to believe about You?
3. Lord, where have I grown so familiar with You that I have lost my sense of who You actually are?
4. Lord, help me want what is true about You more than what is comfortable.

After silence, invite the group to note anything they believe God is surfacing in them.

CLOSING REFLECTION

At the center of these chapters is a God who cannot be defeated; not by the sins of His own people, not by the armies of His enemies, not by the carelessness of those who should have known better. What looked like defeat was always the beginning of something else.

And the good news for us is this: we are not saved by how well we honor God’s holiness. We are saved by Jesus who honored it perfectly in our place. He is faithful where we drift, reverent where we grow casual, and obedient all the way to the cross.

So the invitation tonight is not: “Try harder so God will not reject your religion.”

The invitation is: *Because Jesus has already done what we could not, you can come honestly, receive His grace, and begin to learn what it means to fear God rightly.*

Closing Prayer

Praise – *Thank God that his holiness is not a threat to those who are in Christ, but a place of refuge.*

Repent – *Ask forgiveness for the ways we have reduced God, used him, and grown casual with him.*

Ask – *Give us a right fear. The kind that is more like love than dread.*

Yield – *May we be a group, a place where, where people are free to be honest about where they are, and where they find you meeting them there.*