

1 Samuel 5-6 • When God Defends His Name

Introduction

This is a continuation of what began in chapter 4 with Eli and his sons Hophni and Phinehas. Throughout these chapters we are presented with a variety of different individuals and groups who are characterized by their treatment, first of all, of the things of God, and therefore of God Himself. God's character and standards do not vary from person to person or situation to situation; He is always the same and regardless of who is involved they must approach and treat Him likewise. In these chapters we have both people who are outright non-believers and those who are supposed to be His people. But what does God do when everyone, regardless of their standing, fail to rightly approach and deal with Him?

¹Now the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. ²Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it to the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon. ³When the Ashdodites arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and set him in his place again. ⁴But when they arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. And the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off on the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. ⁵Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor all who enter Dagon's house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

[Read 5:1-5]

Q: Why would it be “normal” for the Philistines to place the ark in the temple of their god?

A: The common belief in those times was that each nation had a god, and that one nation conquering another was a spiritual reflection of one god defeating another. It was therefore common to bring in the idols of the gods of defeated nations and place them in subordination to the god whom they believed gave them victory. This shows they think the ark is nothing more than another idol.

Q: Who was Dagon?

A: The Philistines were not native to Canaan and archeologists popularly refer to them as “The Sea Peoples” to identify them as a seafaring race who came from other parts of the Mediterranean to settle Canaan. Therefore it is no surprise that their god would be a fish-god represented by an idol composed of the body of a fish with the head and hands of a man. Dagon was the national god of the Philistines. The most famous temples dedicated to Dagon were located in Gaza (Jg. 16:23-30) and Ashdod.

Q: Why do you suppose that God did not supernaturally intervene on behalf of His people Israel when they brought the ark before them in battle against the pagan Philistines?

A: God's people were in a state of sin and in no spiritual condition to warrant God revealing His power on their behalf.

Q: How might this in and of itself actually be a sign to Israel?

A: Compared to the way God worked on their behalf historically, the fact that He failed to intervene supernaturally was a confirmation of the testimony of Phinehas's wife just previous to this: “*The glory has departed from Israel*”. (1 Sam. 4:19-22) The physical mirrored the spiritual.

Point: *There are those who believed because they were born into Israel they were automatically protected and warranted special treatment without embracing the additional requirement of personal faithfulness to His Word and ways.*

Q: Who, instead, experienced a supernatural sign?

A: The pagan Philistines.

Q: What did the Philistines attempt to do?

A: They added the ark to the other religious relics in their temple, attempting to subordinate the God of Israel to their fish-god Dagon, believing that it was Dagon who gave them victory over Yahweh.

Q: What is ironic about what the Ashdodites had to do after the first day?

A: They had to put Dagon back on his feet because even though worshiped as god, he was powerless to help himself.

Q: What is the lesson they missed on that first day?

A: They originally tried to subordinate the God of Israel to Dagon, but found everything reversed. They still did not realize that it was not Dagon who gave them the victory, but that it actually came about by Yahweh.

Q: What does the additional sign of the removal of Dagon's head and hands on the second day represent?

A: Beside being subordinated to the God of Israel again, the cutting off of the head would be a representation of the lack of wisdom on Dagon's part, and the removal of his hands to be his lack of power or ability to defend himself or carryout his will.

Q: How is this a representation of Christ and the New Testament Gospel?

A: The idolatry and false religions of the world fall before the preaching of Christ and His gospel in it and cannot stand against the wisdom and righteousness of Christ.

Q: How do we know that the Philistines did not learn the greater spiritual lesson being taught here?

A: By their treatment of the places on which their idol fell as being so sacred that they would not "tread on the threshold". (v.5) They still elevated their god over the true God in spite of everything that happened.

Application: God will not reveal His power on behalf of His sinning people, but neither will an enemy be allowed to mock His glory or defile His name.

[Read 5:6-12]

⁶Now the hand of the LORD was heavy on the Ashdodites, and He ravaged them and smote them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territories. ⁷When the men of Ashdod saw that it was so, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is severe on us and on Dagon our god."

⁸So they sent and gathered all the lords of the Philistines to them and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?"

And they said, "Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath." And they brought the ark of the God of Israel around.

⁹After they had brought it around, the hand of the LORD was against the city with very great confusion; and He smote the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them. ¹⁰So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. And as the ark of God came to Ekron the Ekronites cried out, saying, "They have brought the ark of the God of Israel around to us, to kill us and our people."

¹¹They sent therefore and gathered all the lords of the Philistines and said,

Q: What is significantly different about God's supernatural working here from the signs He performed previously in Dagon's temple?

A: In Dagon's temple God worked signs meant to teach something greater as to His power and place over every false god; it was a chance for repentance. But because they did not learn that lesson, the signs that come next are directed against them personally because they have escalated to being God's judgment.

Q: What are the three judgments of God that came upon the Philistines?

1. "Tumors" (v.6, 9, 12) We are not 100% sure what this specifically was, but understand it to be something akin to a painful disease of epidemic proportions.
2. "Confusion" (v.9, 11) The term encompasses a kind of spiritual panic. The tumors invoked physical pain, the confusion sent by God inflicted spiritual pain.
3. "Death". (v.10-12) Repeated rejection of God's signs causes an escalation in judgment; first the tumors and confusion, but ultimately came death.

Q: What is ironic about their theory of why they were experiencing these judgments?

A: They consciously and publicly testified that "His hand is severe on us". (v.7) In fact, they even go so far as to now admit God's superiority over Dagon by confessing, "and on Dagon our god".

“Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, so that it will not kill us and our people.” For there was a deadly confusion throughout the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. ¹²And the men who did not die were smitten with tumors and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

¹Now the ark of the LORD had been in the country of the Philistines seven months. ²And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners, saying, “What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us how we shall send it to its place.”

³They said, “If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty; but you shall surely return to Him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed and it will be known to you why His hand is not removed from you.”

⁴Then they said, “What shall be the guilt offering which we shall return to Him?”

And they said, “Five golden tumors and five golden mice according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for one plague was on all of you and on your lords. ⁵So you shall make likenesses of your tumors and likenesses of your mice that ravage the land, and you shall give glory to the God of Israel; perhaps He will ease His hand from you, your gods, and your land. ⁶Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? When He had severely dealt with them, did they not allow the people to go, and they departed?”

⁷“Now therefore, take and prepare a new cart and two milch cows on which there has never been a yoke; and hitch the cows to the cart and take their calves home, away from them. ⁸Take the ark of the LORD and place it on the cart; and put the articles of gold which you return to Him as a guilt offering in a box by its side. Then send it away that it may go. ⁹Watch, if it goes up by the way of its own territory to Beth-shemesh, then He has done us this great evil. But if not, then

Application: *God's signs always have a dual effect, either working to affirm the righteous or to bring judgment on the unrighteous.*

Q: What might be the greater spiritual meaning of the ark being passed from Ashdod to Gath to Ekron?

A: “Ashdod” means “a strong place of oppression”, “Gath” means “fortified”, and “Ekron” means “uprooting”. There is a kind of spiritual picture mirrored in the meaning of these places which shows God at work in the lives of non-believers by placing increasing spiritual pressure which ultimately results in total removal if they do not repent.

Application: *The repeated and continual rejection of God's signs and message inevitably leads to the wrath of God's judgment. The Philistines witnessed miraculous signs and wonders, but because they rejected their greater meaning, they were not transformed by them but suffered judgment because of them.*

[Read 6:1-12]

Q: What can we learn from the fact that these events all took place over a seven month period?

A: It speaks to the hardness of their hearts that they endured God's increasing judgment for so long.

Q: What is different about who is approached for advice on how to solve the problem now from who was consulted previously in chapter 5?

A: In the last chapter they first consulted “the lords of the Philistines”, (5:8 , 11) now they are consulting “the priests and the diviners”. (6:2) The politicians when first consulted sought to solve the problem by moving it from one political domain to another; the spiritual leaders now being consulted want to move the problem to another spiritual domain.

Q: What seems to be a big part of problem inferred in v.9?

A: One group seems to think that everything that has happened is a coincidence that can be explained by natural phenomena, the other that this is nothing less than the hand of God. Having not learned the right lessons from any of the signs, they seek closure to the whole situation by seeking yet another sign.

Q: What is the first thing that is acknowledged if the situation is to be resolved spiritually?

A: They need a guilt offering. (v.3) Biblically, nothing can be accomplished without the first step of repentance of sin.

Q: What is the next thing they do?

A: They make an offering of the golden mice and tumors on behalf of everyone involved (v.4-5); the purpose was to “give glory to the God of Israel” (v.5) They had to give in to the initial issue God raised in Dagon's temple of His authority and rightful place.

Q: What is the amazing context that is provided by the priests and diviners to assure the Philistines that this was the right course of action?

A: Not to “harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts”. (v.6) They realize that they are not just in the same physical situation as Pharaoh and the Egyptians, but the same spiritual situation, where a hardened heart led to more and more intense signs ultimately resulting in death.

we will know that it was not His hand that struck us; it happened to us by chance.”

¹⁰Then the men did so, and took two milch cows and hitched them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home. ¹¹They put the ark of the LORD on the cart, and the box with the golden mice and the likenesses of their tumors. ¹²And the cows took the straight way in the direction of Beth-shemesh; they went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right or to the left. And the lords of the Philistines followed them to the border of Beth-shemesh.

¹³Now the people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley, and they raised their eyes and saw the ark and were glad to see it. ¹⁴The cart came into the field of Joshua the Beth-shemite and stood there where there was a large stone; and they split the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. ¹⁵The Levites took down the ark of the LORD and the box that was with it, in which were the articles of gold, and put them on the large stone; and the men of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices that day to the LORD. ¹⁶When the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned to Ekron that day.

¹⁷These are the golden tumors which the Philistines returned for a guilt offering to the LORD: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron; ¹⁸and the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both of fortified cities and of country villages. The large stone on which they set the ark of the LORD is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua the Beth-shemite.

¹⁹He struck down some of the men of Beth-shemesh because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. He struck down of all the people, 50,070 men, and the people mourned because the LORD had struck the people with a great slaughter. ²⁰The men of Beth-shemesh said, “Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God? And to whom shall He go up from us?” ²¹So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, “The Philistines have brought back the ark of the LORD; come down and take it up to you.”

Q: All of the conditions set by the Philistine priests and diviners to prove God was behind these things were all proven true. What does this say, however, about the Philistines? How would you characterize their faith in the God of Israel?

A: They are an illustration of those who will only submit to God long enough for their current predicament to end before returning to their old life. As in the Parable of the Sower, they are like the seed which cannot take root. (Mt. 13)

Application: *Spiritual issues are always a reflection of the condition of one's heart, whether it is willing to repent and submit to the authority of God or is hardened in disobedience and therefore must experience God's escalating judgment.*

[Read 6:13-18]

Q: Why is it not surprising that it was not just Jews, but specifically “Levites” who took possession of the ark?

A: First, according to the Law, only certain Levites were allowed to handle the ark. Second, Beth-shemesh was one of the cities specifically given to the Levites to live in, so it would be no surprise that Levites were present.

Q: What would the Levites have known about the ark?

A: Its proper handling and how to treat it in accordance with God's Word.

Q: What might be important about how they used the cart and cows which returned the ark?

A: Rather than using these things for themselves, they became an offering because they had been exclusively devoted to the service of God. The things of God were treated as belonging to God.

Q: From the very beginning of this event the repeated theme has had something to do with God's supernatural signs. How is that continued here?

A: The cart comes to a miraculous stop at just the right place so as to be a sign for both the Philistines and Israel.

Application: *Signs always have a dual working for believers and non-believers alike.*

[Read 6:19-21]

Q: What is startling about this last sign from God?

A: The Levites who took possession of the ark should have known better since this was specifically forbidden in the Law. (Num. 4:20)

Q: How might this be characterized differently from what the Philistines did?

A: Having known God's Law, the Israelites were committing a willful act of sin, whereas the Philistines had to learn the nature of their actions were sin.

Q: What is the difference in the lesson to be learned by the Israelites than that learned by the Philistines?

A: Whereas the Philistines experienced signs to learn the proper place of God's authority, power and holiness and therefore their subordinate place before Him, those at Beth-shemesh were supposed to have already known this, but having sinned realize they have fallen short of being properly subordinate to Him and will have to yield the ark to Kiriath-jearim. (v.20)

Application: *The same consequences of God's judgment are experienced by everyone who does not submit to His authority, operate according to His Word, and treat Him as holy.*

Overall Application

Look at the entire sequence of events, which actually began in chapter 4:

- *Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, thought they could overcome their personal wickedness and achieve a victory by trusting in the ark. They misused the things of God and experienced God's judgment of death.*
- *Eli refused to discipline his sons who were misusing the things of God for personal gain and therefore experienced God's judgment of death.*
- *The Philistines treated the things of God like just any other things of their gods and experienced God's judgment of death.*
- *The Israelites of Beth-shemesh violated God's specific instructions to the contrary for His things and experienced God's judgment of death.*

"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

— Matthew 7:13-14

Every situation could have been resolved successfully if they had chosen to be obedient to the specific and narrow parameters of God's Word and ways. But regardless of one's heritage or standing, there is never a substitute for obedience to God's Word and ways.