

INTRODUCTION

We have seen in this book what happens when God is angry. What He does is that He judges Eli and his family because of their sin and rebellion and the result is that death reigns. Eli's sons are killed in battle; Eli dies as a result of the shock of losing the ark to the Philistines and poor Phinehas' wife dies giving birth to Ithabod.

Even his name, which means "no glory," is a telling indictment upon the Israelites. God has acted to root out the old sinful leadership within Israel in order to replace it with the new godly leadership of Samuel. But there is still one remaining issue that needs God's intervention. That is the issue of the Ark of the Covenant for it has been taken by the Philistines in to Ashdod (v 1).

Now the Philistines had five leading cities of which Ashdod was probably the greatest. What is God going to do about this situation? Is He going to let the Philistines gloat over their victory and let them think that their god is greater than the God of Israel? Well these chapters give us the answer. We can divide these chapters into three sections using the headings that Dale Ralph Davis uses in his commentary on this first book of Samuel. We will look at the first two headings now and the third one next time

1. THE SUPREMACY OF GOD (5:1-5)

The Ark is brought into Dagon's temple; now Dagon was the grain god, the god who promised them good harvest. They set the Ark beside Dagon probably on a pedestal lower than the one that Dagon stood upon for the point being made is that as Dagon helped the Philistines defeat Israel and capture the Ark then the God of Israel is inferior to Dagon and must serve him.

When they went to bed that night everything was fine in the temple but when they arose the next morning and went to visit their Dagon god they found their god on the ground before the ark of the Lord (v 3). The point that God is making is that He is supreme and He is greater than Dagon. So they put their god back on his pedestal (v 3).

What a telling statement that is for in those days people believed that the gods lived in the images that represented them. What sort of god is Dagon if he needs helping back to his place by the very people who worship him and depend upon him? It is all most comical and anyone who believed in the true God of Israel would laugh at this point as they learn of what has happened.

To be honest if these Philistines had been aware of what was going on they would have repented and turned to the true God of Israel but instead they continue in their folly and help their god back up again (v 3). How many times does God today demonstrate that He is the true God and yet unbelievers ignore him and prefer to carry on with their own silly little powerless gods?

However the situation becomes worst for the next morning Dagon is once again on the floor before the ark of the Lord and this time his head and hands are broken off (v 4). Dagon is being humiliated before the true God. God is demonstrating that He is supreme that He alone should be worshipped. The God of Israel defeats the Philistines and right there in his own backyard in his own temple.

The Philistines placed the ark in such a way in the temple to indicate that the God of Israel has been defeated and therefore should be subject to Dagon. But God acts to show how helpless Dagon is and in the end He practically destroys Dagon. Now has this true God not acted in our day in order to humiliate the god of materialism within our own society?

How many people worshipped money and materialism in general and hasn't God showed us just how foolish it is to put our hope in such a god. Yet sadly even today millions upon millions continue to worship a god that has fallen down and has needed to be helped up again.

Now look how the Philistines responded (v 5) they should have repented and turned to the true God but instead they introduce a new religious practice (v 5), for how awful it would be to stand on a piece of their god. This God of Israel was causing them problems; so they decide to get rid of this God rather than turn to him (v 7) or part with their own gods. That my dear friend is often how unbelievers today respond to the one true God.

When God's hand is upon sinners exposing their gods as helpless what do sinners do? Instead of turning to the true God in repentance they become even more religious, they adopt a new religious practise (v 5) or else they try to get rid of the true God. They put him out of their minds, they stop going to church or attending special services and instead they continue foolishly following their own man made gods that are helpless.

How foolish the unbelieving heart is and that is just how foolish we were before the true and supreme God opened our hearts and minds to his truth something that we should always be grateful about.

But the real message of these opening five verses is addressed to Israel and to believers today. The message is clear God is supreme, unlike the foolish gods of this age; the God of the Bible does not need help from anyone. He does not need the Israelites to fight the Philistines in order to gain the victory He is supreme; He can fight them on his own.

He will bring back the Ark all by himself without help from anyone because God is supreme in fact as we will see He will use his enemy the Philistines to fulfil his purpose of getting the Ark back. The lesson is clear God is self-sufficient and supreme, He cannot be manipulated and used as a lucky charm as the Israelites thought in chapter 4), He cannot be used for our own convenience, and He does not need anyone to help him accomplish his purposes.

This is a message that the church needs to learn today. God does not need us, now note I did not say He does not want us or that He does not use us, but He does not need to do so. He is totally independent of us and it is us who need him. We can easily think that because God's cause in our land is suffering that He needs our help.

We can be tempted to think of methods or techniques that could be used that will cause people to become interested in him. Sadly some churches have gone down that road but to do so is to say that our God is like Dagon that He needs our help.

There is nothing that we can do that will help God, God is supreme He does not need us and He accomplishes his purposes by his own power. Now that is not the same as saying that God in his wisdom does not choose to use us because we know that He does; but He does that, not because He needs our help but He does that in order to show us how much we need him.

It is easy and dangerous to manipulate situations because we think that God needs a helping hand, such manipulation ends up hindering God, not helping him. Therefore learn the lesson God is supreme He does not need any help from us but we constantly need his help. What are we worried about when it comes to Islam in this country? Is our God not supreme and rules over the god of Islam?

We speak about the rise of Islam as if our God is powerless to do anything about it, but our God is supreme and rules this universe without any help from you or me. So we ought to trust him and follow him and simply obey his word.

2. THE SEVERITY OF GOD (5:6-6:12)

God shows that He is supreme in the way that he treats the Philistines, He brings judgement upon them and the Philistines and their gods are powerless to do anything about it. The Philistines will learn that this was no tame or harmless God that they think they have conquered, the ark may well have fallen into their hands but the reality is that the Philistines had fallen into God's hands.

We read that Lord's hand was heavy upon the people of Ashdod (5:6); He brought devastation upon them for He struck them with tumours which in turn brought terror, suffering and death upon the people (vs. 5:9 & 11-12). Since rats which are destroying the country are mentioned (6:5) then some scholar's think that the tumours may have been swellings of the armpits, groin and sides of the neck that are symptomatic of the bubonic plague which of course is carried by rats. What we can be sure of is that God is bring this upon the Philistines whether by bubonic plague or by some other means.

The Philistines confess that neither their god nor they themselves could stand up to such a God (5:7) and therefore after an official consultation the Ark arrives in Gath but so does the plague and the panic (5:8-9).

Gath sent the Ark to Ekron but the people of Ekron did not want the ark (5:10) for it had now become a hot potato that no one wanted. The Philistines were learning that God's hand was very heavy against them, his judgement had come upon them and death and disease was rampant (5:11). The Ark was in the hands of the Philistines for seven months but it must have been a very long and painful seven months for them (6:1).

After 7 months the consensus was to send the Ark back to Israel where it belonged. But that raised a question; how could they do that, the Philistines did not know; so they turn to the Priests and the Diviners who were the leaders of their religion in order to consult with them (6:2). The Priests and the Diviners tell the people that it is imperative for a guilt offering to accompany the Ark on its return and so they give them full instructions on how to do this (6:4-9). As there were five main cities of the Philistines with five rulers over them they are to make five gold tumours and five gold rats that caused these tumours and their hope is that this guilt offering may be acceptable to the God of Israel and that He may lift his heavy hand from the people (6:5).

This offering is to be placed on a new cart and yoked with two cows that have just calved and have never been yoked before (6:7). And the Ark was to be placed on the cart with the golden rats and tumours in a chest beside the ark (6:8). It is all planned in such a way so that the people will know if the God of Israel really has been against them or whether they were simply unlucky.

I don't think they really believed it was down to bad luck, but if the cows went straight to Beth Shemesh (6:9) then they would know the God of Israel is against them. The God who controlled the tumours and the rats is the God who can control a cart pulled by two suckling cows. They wanted to know for sure if this was God's work so they made it as hard as they could.

Anyone would know that any cows would naturally go back to their calves; it would go against nature for such cows to go straight towards Israel and abandon their calves. The cows went straight towards Beth Shemesh as if guided by an invisible hand (6:12), it was official and clear God's hand has been against the Philistines.

The Philistines witnessed what occurred (6:9, 12, & 16) and it is clear that God was speaking to them in what one commentator called a "low" but clear voice. He spoke to the Philistines through cows rather than prophets, and they should have responded to him with genuine repentance and true faith. They should have turned from their false gods to the true and living God who is supreme.

God had made himself clear to them in language that they could understand now they must respond accordingly. You see even in judgement God is demonstrating his mercy. God does not have to explain anything to the Philistines; He did not have to play their game “watch the cow.” Who are these Philistines to think that God will respond to their game?

But the fact that God does do so shows us that the judgement had a purpose, it was not just to punish the Philistines for their sin but to show them the true way to God, to reveal himself to them. That is how God so often treats sinners today. There are times when He judges them in this world. Their sin draws from him his wrath and they face some painful and terrible times as a result. Nothing seems to go right for them, perhaps illness dogs them and through one means or another, God reveals to them that his treatment of them is because God’s hand is heavily upon them. He is revealing himself to them, in order that they might seek him. He wants sinners to turn from their sin and to turn to him for forgiveness. He gracious and which means that sometimes He firmly deals with sinners in order to warn them to turn to him.

However sadly just like the Philistines many do not respond to the one supreme God in the way that they should. The Philistines returned home (6:16) to their old Dagon god, no doubt glad that this whole episode is over. Perhaps they sighed with relief and then went back and repaired Dagon and perhaps they were glad that they have finally got rid of the God of Israel. However there was no sign of repentance.

Even as Christians we can so easily respond like the Philistines. I remember when I was much younger both in age and faith I would often bargain with God and say to God “if you get me out of this trial I will respond accordingly.” It was stupid but sometimes God graciously answered my prayer; showing me He is God but I sadly never responded. It is easy even as Christians to respond only to the pain and not to the truth that God’s providence is teaching us.

For example unemployment, bereavement and illness can come upon us and we begin to be more zealous for God. We get more involved in the life of the church; we may give more of our money and pray more often. However as time passes we find another job, we move on from the bereavement and our health improves and we go back to our old ways and our old habits.

That my dear friend shows us just how hard the human heart really is? But we must remember the reason why God disciplines his people is to expose our sin so that we will repent and seek his grace for ourselves.

That is also why He warns sinners through his temporary judgements for He wants sinners to respond to his judgements may I say that if there is anyone whether believer or unbeliever present today and you feel God’s hand upon you or if in the future you sense the Lord’s hand heavily upon you; then can I urge you to repent and seek his forgiveness and receive his mercy and grace. God’s hand on us is good news for it means that He is revealing himself to us and therefore giving us an opportunity to repent and receive his mercy.

Don’t waste those opportunities repent and trust in this supreme God who rules our universe

Amen