

INTRODUCTION

Last time we looked at the supremacy of God as he topples Dagon and proves himself to be supreme. He is the self sufficient God who does not need anything or anyone. We also saw his severity as He poured out his judgement upon the Philistine cities because of their sin and so the Philistines decide to send the ark of God back to Israel because of the fear and terror that it brought upon their nation.

The Philistine religious leaders draw up a plan that includes suckling cows that have never been yoked, being yoked together. It also involved a new cart and models of tumours and rats. Eventually under the invisible hand of almighty God the cart makes its way to Beth Shemesh (6:12). Now how will the people of God at Beth Shemesh react to the ark? Do they need to fear it like the Philistines? Well let us pick the story up again.

1. HOW TO DEAL WITH THE AWESOME HOLINESS OF GOD

Now as Beth Shemesh was a Levitical city (Joshua 21:16; 1 Chronicles 6:59) so it was right and appropriate for the ark to go there as only Levities were allowed to handle the ark of God. Now when the ark arrives the people are busy in fields for it was harvest time (late May - early June v 13). At harvest time there would be harvest parties going on out in the field, the men would be reaping the women and children gleaning and gathering grain into bundles, it was a time of joy with much singing and laughter.

Now as the cart came up the hill the people's attention was drawn to the coming ark, it was unmistakable with its gold and with the two cherubim with their wings overshadowing the lid, which was the mercy seat or atonement cover. The response was one of great joy, they saw that God was bringing the ark back to them in a most unusual way but in a way that made it clear that it was the Lord's hand guiding these two cows (v 13).

The cows stopped close to a large stone that was in the field of a man named Joshua whom we know nothing about. The Levities were immediately summoned to take down the ark because as I said only the Levites were allowed to handle or move the ark for if anyone else did this; they would meet with death (v 15; Numbers 1:51). Therefore the ark was to be handled with care not because it was fragile but because it belonged to God, it represented his holy presence among his people.

Therefore probably using the large rock as an altar they offered a sacrifice to their God. They used the cart for firewood and the cows for the offering and by doing so the Levites were leading the people in an act of worship to their God.

The law specifically required unblemished males for this kind of offering (Leviticus 1:3 & 22:19) but this part of the Mosaic law was not adhered to by the people of Beth Shemesh (v 14) perhaps they allowed their joy and relief of having the ark back to cloud their thinking about the worship of God.

It seems that their worship was casual here, "it will do" sort of attitude rather than obeying the Lord in every detail concerning this sacrifice. Here lay the root of their problem, as we will see in a minute. Now having witnessed these proceedings the five rulers of the Philistines returned to Ekron and then no doubt on to their own cities (v 16). It was a day and a period of months that they would never forget.

Meanwhile back in Beth Shemesh the priests should have covered the ark as prescribed by law (Numbers 4:5, & 19-20) but they failed to do so. Perhaps because they did not have this ark for some seven months this had made them become careless and neglectful about the things of God.

It was this neglect that led to God's wrath being poured out on Beth Shemesh because some people came to the ark and looked upon the ark (v 19).

The NIV has "looked into the ark" which may be right. It could be that the people were curious with what the Philistines had done with the ark, and what about the contents of the ark? Is the law still in the ark? It could be that their curious natures got the better of them and they looked into the ark, which was something that no one was allowed to do.

If this was the case then they were deliberately disobeying God's command. But the Hebrew text can read and probably means that they "looked upon the ark" no doubt with curiosity. You see one reason why the ark was to be covered was so that no one could look upon the ark, the ark taught the people that God is holy and awesome and must not be treated lightly.

Therefore by failing to cover the ark and by looking "upon it" the Lord acts to declare his holiness among his own people. He puts 70 of the people to death (v 19). Some versions have 50,070 people and most Hebrew texts have the larger number but it is unlikely that Beth Shemesh had such a large population; so it seems that the text somehow has become corrupted.

There are some Hebrew texts which have 70 as the number and so modern translations go for the smaller number for it seems reasonable because of what we know of the size of Beth Shemesh. However the number is not that important what is important is the message that God is sending through this act of judgement.

Now it seems that these men did not fall a victim of some heaven sent plague like the Philistines did; but their deaths were a direct result of the intervention of God in judgement upon them.

Now how will the people react and respond to such a judgement. Their reaction is surprising for instead of repenting of their sin those who had so recently rejoiced at the return of the ark acted like their pagan neighbours. They asked a couple of questions that reflect their hearts (v 20).

They realised that this God that they were dealing with was holy and could not be trifled with but their response to their own question is sinful for God was in a covenant relationship with Israel and was to dwell with them but the people want to be rid of him. Instead of realising that they cannot stand before such an awesome holy God because they were sinners and then dealing with their sin through repentance and sacrifice they decide to get rid of God from their midst.

They cannot cope with his awesome holiness that brought judgement upon them. There is always a sense of the fear of God for when one senses that you are in the presence of the Lord who is holy and powerful then one is conscious of your own sinfulness and unworthiness before such a God. That sense of sin and unworthiness brings fear into our hearts.

But the way that we deal with that sense of guilt and worthlessness will tell us just how serious we are about dealing with this holy God. By nature our first reaction when faced with the God who is holy is to hide from him or to seek to be rid of him for his holiness burns into our souls. Do you remember when Isaiah encountered God's holiness his first response was a realisation of his own unworthiness (Isaiah 6:5).

Likewise when Peter came to understand who Jesus was he wanted him to depart because he was unworthy of him (Luke 5:8). In many ways it is a natural reaction to want to be rid of the Lord when confronted with his awesome holiness for we can become overwhelmed with a sense of our own unworthiness.

But although it is a natural reaction to want the Lord to leave us because his holy presence is overwhelming at the same time we know that there is an attraction about this awesome holy God

who makes us feel uncomfortable. While we know that in and of ourselves we cannot stand before God we also realise that we cannot live without him (Acts 17:28). While we sense his holiness and our sinfulness; yet we also know that this holy God is full of love and grace for sinners and is willing to meet us in our need.

Therefore the way that God meets our need for forgiveness and cleansing is by sending his only Son to die for us. He became the atoning sacrifice that was needed so that sinners overwhelmed with the holiness of God and with their sense of guilt and sin could receive pardon and a clear conscience by trusting in God's Son Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on our behalf.

Therefore the result of such a sacrifice is that although we were once strangers to God we are brought into his holy presence through the work of Jesus Christ and are adopted into his family. Therefore how should one correctly respond to the awesome holiness of God? By realising that we are unworthy to stand in his presence but then to realise that because of Jesus Christ we can be cleansed and adopted into his family and made children of God through Jesus Christ.

We who were sinners and overwhelmed by the holiness of God are made holy like him through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

That is how we all should respond to this true and holy God but sadly many faced with God's holiness chose to rebel and send God away from them. That is how the people of Beth Shemesh responded. They wanted to get rid of God not that they could not stand in his holy presence for they could by repenting and sacrifice; but because this holy God made them feel uncomfortable and they did not want such a God.

Instead of being glad that they were having their sin exposed and turning to the Lord as a consequence for forgiveness they could not cope with such a God and did not want such a God. It was the same in the New Testament when the owners of the pigs rejected Jesus because he allowed the demons that came out of the man to enter into their pigs to the ruination of the pigs.

The owners couldn't cope with such a person they wanted rid of Jesus because He made them uncomfortable and ruined their nice sinful lives (Matthew 8:28-34). Sadly there are people today whom God comes to and enables them to feel the weight of their own sin. He makes them feel uncomfortable about their lives but instead of turning to him in true repentance and rejoicing in his wonderful salvation they wish he would leave them alone and God often gives people exactly what they want.

Therefore my dear friend; if you encounter God today, do not turn him away submit to him bow down before him in repentance and seek his wonderful forgiveness that He offers through His Son Jesus Christ.

The people of Beth Shemesh set about trying to get rid of the ark and their God. They decide to investigate the possibility of the ark going to Kiriath jearim. Now Kiriath jearim may well have been another Levitical city and therefore they are invited to come down and fetch the ark.

The people of Kiriath jearim gladly did so and brought it to Abinadab's house who was probably of Levitical descent (7:1) and there the ark remained for approximately 90 years (2 Samuel 6). Abinadab truly respected the ark and so he consecrated his son Eleazar to keep watch over the ark (7:1). The blessing that the people of Beth Shemesh could have enjoyed now rested on the house of Abinadab but only because the people responded to the ark in the right way with true repentance.

That blessing of having God's presence with you can be yours today if you will only respond to this holy God in the right way. Do not rebel against him. Do not ask him to leave you alone because

He makes you feel guilty or uncomfortable. Instead confess your sin to him and trust in Jesus as Saviour, trust in his atoning work on your behalf and then enjoy the blessing of knowing that you belong to God's family.

The greatest lesson that we need to learn from this section of God's word is to realise that God is holy and therefore He must be handled with great care. In the New Testament we have two incidents that remind us that God is not to be trifled with. The first one is found in Acts 5 where Ananias and Sapphira tried to deceive God when they lied to him about the money they were bringing to him.

They pretended that it was all the money that they had received for the property they sold. Now there was nothing wrong with holding some of the money back but they were judged and killed because they were trying to deceive God by giving the impression that they were giving him all the money (Acts 1:1-11). Death came upon them because of their foolish sin for they were treating God lightly they thought that He was someone that you could deceive and fool.

Now as I said the early believers were not commanded to sell their property or to give all the proceeds from the sale to the Apostles. But because of the pride of this couple they gave the impression that they were actually making a big sacrifice in giving all the money to the Apostles.

They were hypocrites giving the impression that their sacrifice was greater than it was. O they were making a sacrifice there is no question about that but their attitude made their sacrifice unacceptable. But the real problem lies within the heart, they were proud and wanted their fellow Christians to think well of them. They were more concerned for man's approval than God's.

My dear friends' sin is always against a Holy God and therefore it is always serious and should never be trifled with. Therefore in order to show how serious sin is God makes an example of Ananias and Sapphira as a warning to us all not to trifle with sin (Acts 5:5-10).

Therefore because God is holy, sin must not be excused or played with but rooted out of our lives otherwise we are in danger of falling into the hands of a holy God. I think it is a sobering truth that God took the life of sinning believers in Acts 5 in order to teach others in the church a very important truth about sin. Our holy God hates sin and He longs that His people will deal with all sin in their lives and that every church will deal with sin within its membership.

The second New Testament passage I want to turn your attention to is found in 1 Corinthians 11. Do you remember in Corinth that some died because they abused the ordinance of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:30). They came to the Lord's Supper with wrong attitudes and wrong hearts. The result was some who abused the Lord's Supper fell ill and some even died.

That is how seriously God takes sin, which is why Paul calls upon us to examine our hearts before we partake of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:28). But the lesson is clear, sin and all types of sin is serious before a God who is holy.

It must be repented of and confessed otherwise we might face the discipline of the Lord for although we might take sin lightly God never does and unless we deal with it; we are inviting this holy and awesome God to deal with it for us.

Let us not trifle with this God, let us not play around with him by not taking him seriously or by not obeying him precisely; for He is Holy and who can stand in the presence of the Lord this holy God (v 20)? The answer is clear no one can on his or her own merit; we can only stand before him in the merit of His Son Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us.

Amen

