

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

SEPTEMBER 9TH-10TH, 2023 // 1 SAMUEL

THE RETURN OF THE ARK (1 SAMUEL 6:1-12)

In chapter four, the people of Israel took the Ark of the Covenant (a symbol of God's covenant, rule, and presence over His people) from Shiloh into battle against the Philistines.

- Israel was defeated (Eli and his sons died), and the ark was taken back to Philistia and placed in the shrine of their god, Dagon (1 Sam. 5).
- God's power manifested in the shrine of Dagon, and the Philistines were struck with tumors.

For seven months (vs. 1), the ark of God was sent between the cities of Philistia. Wherever it went, death and disease followed (5:6-12).

- Eventually, the lords of the Philistines turned to their priests and diviners to tell them how to send the ark back (vs. 2).
- Sending the ark back was no easy task. The Philistine priests had enough sense to realize they'd offended the God of Israel (vs. 3).

As an act of recognition for their guilt in offending Yahweh, the Philistine priests recommended the ark be sent back to Israel with appeasement gifts: five gold tumors and five gold mice (vs. 4-5).

- Some scholars think there might have been a connection between the tumors and mice (like the bubonic plague).
- The Philistine priests warned the leaders not to harden their hearts like the Egyptians (vs. 6).

A plan was put together to send back the ark and to verify whether or not it was Yahweh who brought these plagues upon Philistia (vs. 7-9).

- The plan involved putting the ark (with the guilt offerings) on a new cart pulled by two milk cows who had never been yoked.
- The calves of these cows would be taken away and penned up, and the cows pulling the cart with the ark on it would be turned loose.

If the cows did not move at all, or if they went back to their calves, it would be "proof" that Yahweh was not in control and the Philistines had nothing to fear.

- If the cows did not head in the direction of Israel, the Philistines would have proof that all the calamity that had come upon their nation just happened "by chance" (vs. 9).

BY CHANCE...?

Many people attribute some kind of power in our universe to coincidence or chance, as if the world was supposedly brought into being and operates by random nothingness.

- When we leave God out of the picture, it might seem like there is luck, coincidence, or chance (Eccl. 9:11-12).
- Nothing happens by chance. We live in a cause-and-effect world ruled by a sovereign God.

Under normal circumstances, milk cows who had never been yoked would never leave their calves and pull a cart together up the road---but Yahweh was in control.

- The cows did not turn to the left or the right but went straight up the road to the city of Beth-Shemesh (vs. 12).
- This was a miracle, and it sent the message loud and clear to Philistia that Yahweh is God.

WHO IS ABLE TO STAND? (1 SAMUEL 6:13-7:1)

For seven months, the symbol of God's presence, power, and rule over Israel (the ark) had been in the hands of a pagan nation.

- Israel must have felt like God had left them.
- It makes sense that the people of Beth-Shemesh were overjoyed when they saw the ark approaching them in the cart (vs. 13).
- Beth-Shemesh was a Levitical city set aside for the clan of Kohath.

The clan of Kohath oversaw caring for the ark (Num. 4:4,15).

- The ark came to rest in the field of Joshua near a large rock, and the people were so overjoyed they split the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord (vs. 14).
- The Israelites were very careful to let the Levites handle the ark (Num. 4), and the ark and the guilt offerings were set upon a large rock.

From a distance, the five rulers of the Philistines watched the festivities as Israel rejoiced and offered sacrifices to the Lord (vs. 16).

- Philistia had set up an elaborate and difficult test for God, but it seems that they were eventually persuaded by the power and glory of God.
- Do we have enough wisdom to recognize God's discipline when it shows up in our lives? Or do we ignore it and chalk things up to "chance"?

The ark of the covenant was a symbol of God's power, transcendence, and holiness.

- As such, the ark was only to be handled by specific Levites from the family of Kohath (even they were not supposed to touch the ark itself; Num. 4:15).
- The ark did not have handles and was not to be carried by lifting it directly with one's hands.
- Instead, it was to be carried by inserting gold-overlaid wooden poles into gold rings at each corner of the ark (Ex. 25:12-15).

Apart from touching the poles, it was forbidden to touch the ark.

- Some curious men of Beth-Shemesh not only touched the ark, but they lifted the lid of the ark and looked inside (vs. 19).
- For their dishonor, disrespect, disobedience, and irreverence, God struck down 70 people.
- The people of the town were afraid and asked, "Who is able to stand...?" (vs. 20).

"WHO IS ABLE TO STAND IN THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD THIS HOLY GOD?" (VS. 20)

We want our God to be casual, easygoing, and easy on our sins and disobedience.

- We often think His commands are optional and God is not serious about our obedience---He's just "love" (which we define for ourselves).
- God is holy---He is absolutely pure, set apart, separate, and perfect.

The people of Beth-Shemesh sent a message to the residents of Kiriath-Jearim telling them to come and get the ark (vs. 21).

- The men of the city came and got the ark and moved it to the house of Abinadab (7:1), whose son Eleazer cared for it until the ark was moved to Jerusalem by King David in 2 Samuel 6.
- Their question wasn't, "How can we be made right with this holy God?" but "How can we get rid of God's presence in our lives?"

LONGING FOR THE LORD (1 SAMUEL 7:2-8)

Twenty years passed while the ark remained at Kiriath-Jearim (vs. 2).

- The people of God had the ark back, but all was not well in Israel.
- Their cities were in ruins, their armies were being defeated, and the Philistines were dominating them---all because they were not right with God.
- The people of Israel "longed/lamented" for the Lord (vs. 2).

If you're a believer but have drifted away and found yourself in a place of emptiness, desperation, and hopelessness---you know what it feels like to "long/lament for the Lord".

- Unfortunately, many of us don't have the wisdom to recognize that it's the Lord that we're longing for.
- "You have made us for Yourself...our hearts are restless until they rest in You." ---Augustine

Samuel arrives on the scene and leads Israel to follow the proper steps in seeking God's help.

- Instead of Israel just looking to the ark as a good luck charm, Samuel instructs the people to repent and "set your hearts on the Lord, and worship only Him" (vs. 3-4).
- Getting God in your life looks like you surrendering your heart to Him, not just looking for quick fixes or trying to use Him to get what you want.

The people repented of their idolatry (vs. 4).

- Then they humbled themselves as they gathered together to worship the Lord (vs. 5-6).
- Pouring out water before the Lord and fasting were both practices connected with celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles (see also John 7:37-39).
- All while Israel was fasting, praying, repenting, and worshipping before the Lord, the Philistines began to march toward Israel (vs. 7).

When the news arrived that the Philistines were coming, the people were afraid.

- But instead of trusting in the ark as they did before, they pleaded with Samuel to continue crying out to the Lord for them (vs. 8).
- "I've fallen away...how do I return to the Lord?"

1. Put away your idols and repent.
2. Confess your sins and agree with God on them.
3. Pray and seek the Lord, putting Him first.

THE LORD HAS HELPED US (1 SAMUEL 7:9-17)

At this point, Israel has no standing army and no king to organize one.

- The people had made themselves vulnerable by gathering together at Mizpah to seek the Lord, and the Philistines were on their way to attack.
- The greatest weapon that Israel had was their faith in Yahweh, which was a faith expressed in prayer.

Samuel sacrificed the burnt offering to the Lord and cried out on behalf of the people (vs. 9).

- God answered Samuel's prayer in a miraculous way.
- Baal was a Canaanite god of storms---he was usually depicted holding a lightning bolt, and many Canaanites (including those in Philistia) believed that Baal defeated their enemies and produced crops through his power.

Samuel is sacrificing a burnt offering and praying to the Lord, even as the Philistines are closing in (vs. 10).

- Yahweh sends thunder---a divine, providential intervention from the sky that confuses the enemy and sends them into a panic.
- God delivers His people and declares a message to all of Israel and Philistia that He alone is Lord over all.

The Philistines are subdued and driven out from the cities and territories that originally belonged to Israel (vs. 11-14).

- To commemorate God's miraculous intervention, Samuel set up a stone monument and named it Ebenezer ("...The Lord has helped us to this point," vs. 12).
- We often forget the importance and power of gratitude and praise after God's deliverance.

Accurately remembering what God has done for us in the past helps us trust Him now and in the future.

- Verses 15-17 summarize Samuel's career as a judge over Israel.
- Samuel traveled between various locations to lead the people, but his home was always in Ramah, and he had built an altar to the Lord there.

There is one true God---He is holy and sovereign, and He is what you need more than anything else in your life.

- The events and trajectory of your life are not meaningless and random---there's no such thing as chance. Sin and negligence toward God have consequences, and God often allows those consequences to set in to get our attention.

"HAVE I FAILED TO RECOGNIZE GOD'S HOLINESS?"

- No one can stand before God and be made right with Him through their own works, religious performance, morality, or merit (Isa. 64:6).
- The perfect, atoning sacrifice of Jesus is the only thing that cleanses us and enables us to stand before Him.

- We are only justified by Jesus' blood! Then, we are sanctified and made holy through His Spirit.

"HAVE I RETURNED TO THE LORD ON HIS TERMS?"

- We can only approach God through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5).
- If we have done that but have drifted, we must...

1. Put away our idols and repent.
2. Confess our sins and agree with God on them.
3. Pray and seek the Lord, putting Him first.

"AM I TRUSTING IN THE LORD FOR HIS HELP?"

- Israel's primary sin was forgetting God's merciful and loving deliverance in their past and trusting in the other gods of the cultures that surrounded them.
- Some trust in politics and government.
- Some trust in money, career, and success.
- Some trust in pleasure, comfort, entertainment, acclaim/applause, and whatever popular trend emerges in culture.
- Psalm 20:7-8, NIV