

1 SAMUEL 6 - WHO CAN STAND BEFORE THE LORD?

Study 7

THE MOST BASIC RELIGIOUS QUESTIONS

It's without a doubt that many people are very religious. When Paul addressed the Philosophers in Athens he said: "I perceive that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22). Even those who would say they are irreligious have simply deferred where they place their highest authority, whether that be in science for answers, or the state to provide law.

In the same way, the Philistines, the enemies of God's people, were very religious. They delighted in capturing the Ark and subduing the true and living God. But when the hand of the Lord became heavy in judgement, the Philistines began to ask the most basic religious questions: "How do we escape God's wrath?"

They also asked questions about how to approach God rightly, as they sought to return the Ark in the proper way.

Finally, once the Ark was returned, the Israelites asked another basic religious question: "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?"

GOD'S HOLY JUDGEMENT

The Ark remained in Philistia for 7 months. The consensus was clear, the judgement of God was heavy, and thus the Ark needs to go. But how were they to do that? The Philistine lords turned to the clergy, the priests and diviners for answers (6:2). They reply that the Ark must return with a guilt offering (6:4b-9). It seems that the events in the Temple of Dagon, and in Philistia had put the fear of God into them.

They had insight, in that they realised they had offended a Holy God. Though they were still in ignorance as they were oblivious as to how to handle the Ark.

Nonetheless, we see some basic religious truths here. First, God's judgement came upon them because of their sin. Second, we see that God responds to sin in righteous judgement. Third, God cannot let sin go unpunished and so requires satisfaction for sin.

The Philistines were on the right track, and should they have sent someone to remain in Israel, they would have learnt that the sacrifice that God requires points to Jesus. The Philistines offered costly sacrifices, but sin against an infinitely Holy God, requires an equal offering. Such an offering is found as we gaze at the cross.

READ - 1 SAMUEL 6:1-6

QUESTIONS

1. What features of this passage stand out to you?
2. The Philistines had experienced God's judgement and evidently heard what had happened to the Egyptians at the Exodus and it made them fearful. What is the role of God's judgment against sin in our proclamation of the gospel?

GOD'S HOLY WAYS

In spite of the judgement that the Philistines were under, they still had a measure of doubt. They devised a way to test the situation so that the Philistines can be confident that it was indeed God that was judging them. Unyoked milk cows! Having never been yoked before, the cows would likely be uncooperative. Furthermore, having udders full of milk, the cows would instinctively return to their calves for relief.

The Philistines would know that it was God who brought judgement if the cows pulled the cart up the road to Israel. They had provided an opportunity for God to intervene and speak to them.

The Philistines witnessed the cows march off toward Israel. God had spoken to them. To be sure, the Philistines didn't have God's written Word as Israel did in the Torah. But they had received some truth, and they were responsible for rightly responding to that truth. God had stooped to show them, in terms they could understand, that he himself had destroyed their god, their land, and their bodies. Now what will they do with that revelation? Should they not turn and at least begin to serve or fear this obviously real and living God? Or will they go back to Ashdod and take Dagon to the local image shop for repairs?

Perhaps the majority gave a sigh of relief, glad that the whole ordeal was over, but having hearts that were no more softer to respond to God.

But there is good news here! If God has stooped to reveal himself, even to his enemies, how much more is he pleased to reveal himself to us in his Word? And how much more, as God's people should we be in eagerly responding to God's Word?

READ - 1 SAMUEL 5:7-12

QUESTIONS

1. What features of this passage stand out to you?
2. God spoke to the Philistines through the cows. Can you think of another time when he spoke through an animal?
3. How else has God spoken to the world? (See Romans 1:18-20; Hebrews 1:1-2; 2 Peter 1:19)

GOD'S HOLY PRESENCE

The story now makes a dramatic turn. The Ark returns to Israel, and like the Philistines, the Israelites will now learn of the severity of God and the need to take His holiness seriously.

The primary focus of this passage is verse 19, which also has a number of textual issues. The first issue is that the manuscripts literally read ‘he struck of the people seventy men, fifty thousand men.’ In light of this, different Bibles translate this differently i.e., ESV 70; NKJV 50 070. A consideration is that it would be unlikely that these small agricultural towns would have 50 070 men in them to begin with. Perhaps the answer to this question is best left to eternity.

The second issue is in regards to how the Ark was treated. The passage can be translated that ‘the men looked into the Ark’ or that they ‘looked upon the Ark.’ Either way this is an easier issue, and one that has to do with disregarding the Holiness of God. If the men looked into the Ark, it meant they touched the Ark to remove the lid, something that was expressly prohibited (Num. 4:1-20). If they looked upon the Ark, it would mean they did so with apathy, the Ark was a mere tourist attraction.

Ralph Davis writes

It may be easy to think, “Surely the fact that God doesn’t matter to us is not a matter that matters to him”—until seventy men keel over (v. 19b). Too late we may learn that Israel’s jealous God is not indifferent about our indifference. Might judgment ever fall on us for the same reason? Not because we commit some blatant act of iniquity but because we

lack a passion to adore and delight in God? Perhaps our greatest transgressions are not positive but passive.

READ - 1 SAMUEL 6:13-7:2

QUESTIONS

1. What features of this passage stand out to you?
2. What role does God's Holiness play in your personal worship to God? The Churches worship to God?
3. Read a portion of Joshua 9 (especially 9:17). What nationality were the people of Kiriath-jearim?
4. Why is it good news that God revealed himself to the Philistines and allowed the men of Kiriath-jearim to care for the Ark?