

God is Truly Holy

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn now to our Bible reading this evening, which you'll find in 1 Samuel chapter 6, and reading from verse 13.

It's page 229, if you have one of our church Bibles. And that's the last little section in this brief story we've been looking at together of the, what we're calling it, the Raiders of the Lost Ark.

It's the story of how the Ark of the Covenant of the God of Israel is misplaced, lost in battle to the Philistines, who routed the armies of Israel and inflicted further calamity, great calamity, by capturing the Ark of God, which signified the very presence of God in the midst of his people.

In the Ark, the tablets of the covenant that God had written with his own finger, given to Moses, representing his covenant with his people, the relationship that bound them together, that told them that he was their God and they were his people.

Calamitous to lose that. The Philistines, when they captured the Ark, they were very much mistaken. They thought that somehow they had captured the power of God and either the power of God was gone, was dead, or else he'd come over to their side.

[1 : 19] They were jubilant, took it into the temple of their God, Dagon, in one of their cities. But were aghast to find, of course, the next morning that Dagon, their idol, was fallen flat on his face in front of the God of Israel.

They propped him up. He promptly fell down all over again. After that, the presence of the Ark caused absolute mayhem among the Philistine cities. They couldn't get rid of it fast enough.

Boils, tumors started to appear among their people. And they passed it from one city to another to another. And at last, decided the only way they could get away from the curse of this God upon them was to send the Ark back to its own place.

And last time we saw the story of what they did. They put the Ark on a cart, testing to see whether it really was the Ark of God that had caused the problems to them. So they put two cows in yoke on this cart, separating them from their calves.

The natural thing would be for the cows to go straight back to their calves. But they didn't. They went straight up the road back to their own land, the land of Israel.

[2 : 25] So they knew that it was indeed the presence of God among them that caused all the disasters. And we pick up the story then in verse 13, just inside the borders of Israel in the place called Beth Shemesh.

And now the people of Beth Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. When they lifted up their eyes and saw the Ark, they rejoiced to see it. The cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh and stopped there.

The great stone was there. And they split up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. The Levites took down the Ark of the Lord and the box that was beside it, in which were the golden figures, and set them upon the great stone.

Men of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices on that day to the Lord. And when the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned that day to Ekron.

Probably breathing a mighty sigh of relief, I would think. And these are the golden tumors that the Philistines returned as a guilt offering to the Lord. One for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, and one for Ekron.

[3 : 41] And the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines, belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and unwalled villages. The great stone beside which they set down the Ark of the Lord is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh.

And he, that is the Lord, struck some of the men of Beth Shemesh because they looked upon the Ark of the Lord. He struck 70 men of them.

And the people mourned because the Lord had struck the people with a great blow. And the men of Beth Shemesh said, Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?

And to whom shall he go up away from us? So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirith Jaram, saying, The Philistines have returned the Ark of the Lord. Come down and take it up to you.

The men of Kirith Jaram came and took up the Ark of the Lord and brought it into the house of Abinadab on the hill. And they consecrated his son Eliezer to have charge of the Ark of the Lord.

[4 : 52] From the day that the Ark was lodged at Kirith Jaram, a long time passed, some 20 years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.

Amen. And may God bless us his word. Well, it's a great question, isn't it? Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?

Turn with me again, if you would, to 1 Samuel 6, page 2 to 9, if you have one of the Blue Vistas Bibles. The key question in our text this evening is there in verse 20 of 1 Samuel 6.

Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? In fact, it's the key question, really, for every human being who has ever lived or who ever will live on this earth.

That is, if the Bible is true. Because the Bible tells us that it's appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment. That's what Hebrews 9, verse 27 says.

[6 : 08] We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, says the Apostle Paul. And so the Bible constantly asks this question in varying different ways.

Who can stand before me, says God to Job? Who shall endure the day of his coming? Who shall stand when he appears, says God through the prophet Malachi?

When the great day of judgment comes on the whole world, as John sees in the revelation in his great vision of glory, the cry from all the earth is, Who can stand?

Who can stand before the throne and before the wrath of the Lamb? And the Bible is very clear in its answer to that question also.

Psalms 5, verse 5, tells us, The boastful shall not stand before your eyes, because you hate evildoers.

[7 : 08] The wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous, says Psalm number 1. For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

So bring words. Especially when we realize that what the Bible means by the wicked, because it's not at all what we might sometimes think. Psalm 1 again is utterly plain.

The wicked man in God's eyes is the one who is the opposite of the righteous man. And that is one who does not delight in the instruction of the Lord. The one who scoffs, who scorns, who ignores God's words.

The righteous, the one who may stand before God, is the wise man who fears the Lord, who listens to his words, his words which teach life. Just as the wicked one is the fool who despises and disdains God's words.

That's a refrain, isn't it? Through the Proverbs and many other scriptures we've been studying together recently. The wise man who builds his house on the rock, which will withstand the day of God's judgment, says Jesus, is the one who hears my words and does them.

[8 : 25] Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? Well, this is the one to whom I will look, says the Lord.

The one who is humble and contrite in spirit. The one who trembles at my word. We come tonight to this final study in this story of the lost ark.

And we see the ark finding its way home again, at least not to its true home at the heart of the temple, the tabernacle of God, but at least back into the land of Israel, no longer away and totally absent from the nation.

What's this story been all about? Well, it takes place, as we've seen, in a time of great confusion about the things of God, rather like today, where there's all sorts of spiritualities around every religion under the sun.

But not just outside the church, even inside the professing church of Christ, certainly in our part of the world, a great deal of confusion, a great deal of misunderstanding about what God is really like.

[9 : 35] In fact, there was so much vagueness and misunderstanding about God in this time that we're reading about in Samuel's day, that the people really had no idea that they were so ignorant, no idea that they were, in fact, constantly and completely underestimating the God whom they thought they worshipped.

What was the reason for that great ignorance and confusion? Well, remember, it's there in chapter 3 and verse 1. God's Word had been virtually forgotten in the whole of society.

The Word of the Lord was rare in those days. And it was rare because the religious leaders, the clergy of the day, the priests and the Levites, whose job it was to teach God's words to the people, they themselves had completely neglected God's Word.

And indeed, they'd rejected God's words. They didn't want God's Word interfering with their own lives. And so, of course, they didn't bother thinking it was relevant to anybody else's life either.

They weren't teaching it to anybody. And so there was great ignorance. And the result is God's people were completely ignorant of His Word. And so, if God's people are ignorant, then the whole world around are going to be even more ignorant of what the true God is actually saying to the world.

[10 : 57] The purpose of Israel as a nation, their whole calling was to shine forth the light and the glory of God's heavenly words to the rest of the earth. But if Israel is confused, if Israel is ignorant, how on earth can the pagan cultures around have any hope of knowing anything about the true God of heaven?

And that, of course, has been a common pattern constantly throughout the whole of the history of God's people throughout the Old Testament. Alas, so often it's been the truth of the history of the Christian church right up to the present day.

Instead of God's name being revered among the nations because of His people, what does the prophets say to Israel? And what does Paul say to them? Quoting it. Instead of that, God's name is blasphemed among the nations because of you.

Why is our society today, why is our city today, so utterly ignorant of God? God's word. It's because the professing church of God is so confused and ignorant itself about God's word.

No wonder the world doesn't listen to a church that doesn't even know what it believes itself. And when people are ignorant of God's word, they inevitably remain ignorant of God Himself because that's how God is known.

[12 : 21] God reveals Himself to us in His word. No other way. So it's not surprising that we were told, remember back in chapter 2, verse 12, that the priests, Eli's sons, that they themselves didn't know the Lord.

How could they know the Lord? They never bothered to listen to a word He said. They scorned His word. They rejected His word. How can you know someone if you never listen to anything they say and never respond?

So that's the situation that we're reading about here in ancient Israel. It's an apostate church. It's an apostate culture.

And all around them, as a result, is an ignorant and completely confused world. And so when God does decide to take action to redeem the situation, that in answer to the prayers of a godly remnant who were pouring out their prayers to God, like Hannah was right at the beginning of this book.

Well, when God does start to answer those prayers, in a situation like that, the truth is, people are going to get a very great shock, aren't they? Both in the church and also outside the church in the world.

[13 : 34] They're going to discover that you can't just get a bit of God back into your life the way you want it and everything will be fine. Not a bit of it. You can't just suddenly shoot back to the days of glorious revival and national triumph.

No, no, no. Quite the reverse. When God is really on the move, whether he's doing something new in ancient Israel, as we're reading here, or indeed, whether he's doing something new in his church today in a great push forward towards the consummation of the great coming of the Lord Jesus and his kingdom.

When God begins to move in real power, in any place in the world, when he begins to speak and act to reveal himself, to make himself known as he really is, not as people had imagined him, then he will confront people, both his own people in the church and people outside in the world.

He will confront them with what has become for them a shocking reality. They just don't know what to expect. And that's what this story is telling us all the way through, isn't it?

We've seen it already. That this God, the true God, the real God, the only God, he's not just like the genie in Aladdin's lamp that you can rub up and bring him up to do whatever you want whenever you feel like it.

[15 : 00] No, the true God is not containable. He's not controllable like that. He's a truly sovereign God. He will not be used by human beings, whatever their apparent religious credentials.

And we saw that so clearly in the first part of the story in chapter 4 when Israel were thrashed by the Philistines. And of course, the world and the church will discover that the true God of scriptures is not just one among many gods.

He cannot be downgraded and shared. He won't be relativized or neutralized. He's truly unique. He is the only God. You can't just shove him in the temple beside Dagon or whichever other God you worship and think he'll be happy to share the place with them who are no gods.

No, no, no. And of course, the church and indeed the world will discover that God is not a tame God. He's not a passive God. He's not a God who will never ever upset anybody or do anything nasty.

They discover as we saw last time, he's a truly disturbing God. He's a God who actually when he is on the move will turn people's lives totally upside down.

[16 : 10] And the Philistines saw that, didn't they? That God was far, far too hot for them to handle. But it's not over yet, you see. And this passage about the return of the ark teaches another very hard, very sobering lesson about something that actually is very pertinent because it's been largely forgotten in the church today, certainly in the West.

just as much as it had been forgotten among the people of Beth Shemesh way back then. That is this, that the God of the Bible, the true God, is truly holy.

That God is not just a sort of easy-ozy, anything-goes kind of God. He's not, much as people want him to be today, he's not just a child of the 60s, hippie-ish kind of God.

He'll just go with the flow. No, he's a holy God. And he's a God who can't be approached except on his own terms.

And this passage teaches us not to ever think that we can enjoy the blessings of his promises without, without wholehearted submission and obedience to his word and to his commands.

[17 : 25] Don't think like that. That's what the second half of chapter 6 is telling us. Or we also will be underestimating, fatally underestimating perhaps, the true God that the Bible reveals to us.

The God made known to us ultimately in our Lord Jesus Christ. So look at this last bit of the story as it begins there in chapter 6, verse 13. First sight, you see, it seems very strange, doesn't it?

It seems very unfair how it ends up with this great calamity for the men in Beth Shemesh. Here they are, verse 13, they're going about their lawful business out on their combine harvesters, taking in the harvest.

And what do they see? Well, they see the lost ark coming home. And they're absolutely full of joy. They can't believe it. When they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, they rejoiced to see it.

That's the right thing to do, surely. And it's such great news. They're filled with joy and immediately they have a great celebration. Not such good news for the barbecue, for the cows as it is because they end up on the barbecue, don't they?

[18 : 33] They chop up the cart, use that as charcoal and the cows are sacrificed. Now their instinct is surely a good instinct, isn't it?

They've been rejoicing to see God's ark coming back and they want to give an offering to the Lord. Thanksgiving, a great celebration because God seems to be favoring them and the Lord is coming back among them.

And that's a right instinct. It's right when, as today in the church, we want to have times of great celebration, to thank God when he has done great things, when he seems to be moving among his people again in a great way.

And this celebration really was something absolutely marvelous for them to celebrate given all the calamity that they'd faced. It was a great moment and a great day. And the Philistines saw it, verse 16, and they slink off home.

No doubt they are saying, thank goodness for that, that's the end of it. They probably went home and had a feast of their own to rejoice that the curses that they'd been experiencing were finished. And the people of Bethlehemish all come out and they, verse 17, they admire these golden offerings that the Philistines had given them.

[19 : 48] Remember these golden tumors and golden mice. You can just imagine them, can't you, taking them home to their wives. Oh darling, I've got a lovely present for you. Golden tumor. Or a lovely mouse for you to hang around your neck. And they put up a stone plaque in the field, verse 18, a witness to this day in the field of Joshua.

And if you were writing this story, what would verse 19 be? It'd be something like this, wouldn't it? And so they all lived happily ever after.

That's what you're expecting, isn't it, really, after this great return and this great joy, the story all resolved. But it isn't that, is it? Look at verse 19. It's the exact opposite.

Suddenly, bang, absolute disaster hits these poor men of Beth Shemey. Seventy of them. Imagine that. Probably half the village, maybe even more. Wiped out.

What is going on? It seems so bizarre. It seems so tragic. In fact, we might even say it seems so wicked. Wicked of God. In a great moment of joy and celebration when these people are praising God for his coming back among them and God strikes them down.

[21 : 02] But you see, it's not just a random thing. Not just a capricious act of an unpredictable God. No.

Just like everybody else in this story, the men of Beth Shemesh also have been totally underestimating God. They assumed, didn't they, that just because God had been gracious and was sending back the ark to them, that somehow now God doesn't care anymore about boring things like obedience to his commands, to his holy laws, to his clear instructions about how life is to be lived and about how he is to be worshipped and about how he's to be approached.

As if he'd just become a God who didn't care anymore and you could turn a blind eye to sin and it didn't really matter. You can just imagine, can't you, saying things like this.

Of course, it's marvelous that God's come back. Now, we know God's a God of love. He won't be angry with us ever for anything anymore. And a God of love won't be interested in all that sort of boring old-fashioned Bible stuff that we used to think about before.

So out of date, so passe in our modern chic Beth-semes. See, that's exactly the way people think, isn't it? When God shows himself gracious and kind, we think, oh, he doesn't care anymore about any of those other things.

[22 : 38] And they just assumed that things were quite easy these days. And God's getting much more easy going these days. Everybody else is. Surely God must be keeping in line with our modern times, moving with the times.

So we can hang loose with God, and God will just hang loose with us, and everything will be wonderful. What a great God who affirms everything we think and everything we do. But 70 of these men at least discovered how desperately wrong they were.

they discovered you can't just hang loose and have it your own way with this God. Because the true God is truly holy.

He's a holy God, and he'll only be approached on his own terms, his own way. And that's why these men died for looking at the ark. You might say, what on earth is wrong with that?

It's just the most obvious thing, the most natural thing, isn't it? To be curious, to go and look at the ark and see it after knowing it's been away all that time. Well, I suppose it is natural.

[23 : 45] But here's the thing, things that come naturally to us might often be things that are not at all right, but quite wrong. Isn't that right? Plenty of things come naturally to me, but they're not right to do.

How do I know that? Well, because God tells me they're wrong. In his word. Even when I feel them to be fine. And I think them to be great. God says, no, that's wrong.

I don't want you to do that. And that, you see, is the plain and simple issue here. God is a holy God. And holiness is dangerous to sinful human beings.

To get too close to God's holiness means that our sinfulness causes a terrible reaction. And the reaction is that we crumple up and we die in the face of his holiness.

And that's why way, way back in the Bible in all those boring old bits that the men of Bisham are short were only boring things for the Sunday school exams. That's why God had given very specific laws and instructions to protect his people from the burning danger of his holiness.

[25 : 03] Look back to Numbers chapter 4. It's page 111, I think, if you have the blue Bibles. It's a whole chapter that speaks all about elaborate coverings for God's holy things, especially the ark.

Whenever it was moved, wherever it went, anywhere. And it was so that God's people would be protected from the consuming power of God's holiness in the face of their sin. Even the priest, even Aaron himself, the high priest, could not look upon the ark even for a moment.

Listen to chapter 4, verse 17. The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron saying, Let not the tribe of the clans of the Kohathites be destroyed from among the Levites, but deal thus with them, that they may live and not die when they come near to the most holy things.

Aaron and his sons shall go in and appoint them each to his task and to his burden, but they shall not go in to look on the holy things even for a moment lest they die.

Why did God give commands like that? Because he's a God of love and of mercy. Because he wants to protect his people from themselves and from their sin and from death.

[26 : 23] And he had Moses write it down and he commanded all the people to teach this and all of God's life-giving laws, all the rest of them by the way.

He wanted them to be taught to all the people, to their children, to their grandchildren. Why? So that they would live and not be judged, not die. That's what God says plainly here, isn't it?

But here's the thing, people always know better than God, don't they? And so we don't take God's word seriously.

And we underestimate God, especially with reference to his holiness and his absolute demand for purity. And so people presume on God.

They forget that, yes, God is a God of love and of grace. But that is why he tells us why and how we as sinful human beings can respond to him and live, not die.

[27 : 25] We have to approach God his way. We can only approach God his way because only his way can possibly protect us from the consuming fire of his holiness.

Because God's holiness is dangerous. It's fatally dangerous to sinful human beings. Like so many people among God's professing people today, the men of Beth Shemesh had forgotten, hadn't they, that God is God Almighty.

They thought he was just God Almighty. He'll dance to our tune. And he doesn't bother about any of these things anymore. So you could go to him and say, oh, it's just the way I am.

I don't want to change. I don't have to change. God will affirm us as we are. God will accept us on our terms. But he didn't.

And he's saying to them, you should have taken my words seriously. You should have obeyed me about these things. Now that was a pretty tough lesson to learn, wasn't it?

[28 : 38] And maybe you're thinking, well, thank God we don't live in those days. Thank God we don't live in that world of the Old Testament. Thank God we are New Testament Christians not living with all that fear and trembling.

It's very tempting to think that, isn't it? If you've never read the New Testament. Read it a little more closely, you'll find something very different, won't you?

What do you think of Acts chapter 5 and what happened to Ananias and Sapphira? What do you think of 1 Corinthians 11 where Paul says people in the church had died under God's judgment because they treated carelessly at the Lord's Supper?

What about Hebrews chapter 10 when the Apostle was writing to the New Testament church just like us and he says this, it's a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

I think if you look in your Bibles you'll find that's in the New Testament not the Old Testament. See, this is the same God that we're dealing with. And the problem is we are the same sinful people, the same forgetful people with those same forgetful tendencies about God's holiness.

[29 : 49] Those are people we're reading about in this chapter. And here's something else. We share the same privileges that they had. We have the Bible.

We're not told about how the Philistines maneuvered the ark but they didn't know any better, did they? They didn't have Moses' writings to tell them what to do. But these people had the privilege of God's revelation.

At least they had access to God's word. And what does Paul say? All who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. It's not the hearers of the law.

It's not just those who possess the law who are justified. Paul says it's the doers. No good just saying Lord, Lord, says Jesus. Are you doing what I say?

Privilege confers responsibility, doesn't it? And great privilege confers even greater responsibility. And here's the thing. We today are far more privileged, aren't we, than these people way back then.

[30 : 50] Our Bibles are a lot thicker, a lot bigger. We've got so much more knowledge of God. Knowledge of His holiness. And complete knowledge of the terrible consequences of disobedience to His commands.

We are witnesses, aren't we, of the terrible horror of God's judgment on all sin? Not just in a story like this, here in 1 Samuel 4, but think about the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Don't we see there the full impact of the terrible judgment of God upon human sin taken for us by our own Savior?

That's why the writer in Hebrews 12 says that if the Old Testament people, the Old Testament saints of God didn't escape judgment when He warned them from earth, how much less will we escape when He warns us now from heaven in the complete word of the gospel of the risen Lord Jesus Christ?

How on earth could we possibly think that we could be more casual with the holiness of God than these saints of old? But we should approach Him carelessly or casually and not give any thought to what God says about how it matters.

[32 : 12] Well, if we read the New Testament, friends, we certainly cannot think that, can we? Not if we take the God of the Bible seriously. That's why Hebrews 12 ends like this.

Let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe because our God is a consuming fire.

fire. And that's just the same message, isn't it, that these men of Beth Shemesh learned. The climax of the story is there in verse 20.

They certainly got the message, didn't they? Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? That's the right reaction when we look at God, the real God of true holiness and goodness.

And then we look at ourselves and we see the truth of our sinfulness and our unworthiness. Who can stand?

[33 : 15] The answer has to come from Him, doesn't it? And He tells us we can only stand in His presence if we fall down humbly before Him.

Heed His Word. Obey His Word as He's made it plain to us in the Scriptures. The Word that shows us the one way that can protect us and preserve our lives.

The shelter of His great gospel Word of true repentance and faith and trust in this God who now we know in all His fullness. in the wonderful saving offering of the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The men of Israel learned that the very hard way and it took a very long time. Look at chapter 7 verse 2. 20 years without God blessing them.

20 years of lamenting, learning real heart repentance it seems. before they stopped underestimating God.

[34 : 22] Before they learned that you can't have the blessing of His presence without humble submission and obedience to His Word that says this is the way and this is the only way that you can have fellowship with me a holy God.

But as chapter 7 goes on to tell when they did at last submit when they did at last seek God wholeheartedly when they confessed their sin when they served God alone well you can read it God did send His blessing abundantly on them.

Verse 3 Samuel said to all the house of Israel if you are returning to the Lord with all your heart then put away the foreign gods and the ashteroth from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve Him only and He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.

So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the ashteroth and they served the Lord only. God's blessing did come to them abundantly when they listened and responded to His word His command His word of salvation His gospel.

And friends it still happens that same way today in whole churches which may need to learn a lot about taking the holiness of God a lot more seriously than they do and also in individual lives where we often need to learn to take God far far more seriously than we've been doing.

[36 : 12] And it often takes a long time sometimes it takes very hard lessons to bring us to that point of submission to bring us to that realization that God is truly holy that we can't treat Him lightly that we can't just casually ignore His words as a oh some of them don't matter don't apply who cares that we can't have the blessing of His presence without humble submission and obedience to His command.

Revelation 14.6 gives us these words from the angel fear God and give Him glory because the hour of His judgment has come. This is the eternal gospel to proclaim to every tribe and language and people and nation.

And we've learned recently haven't we in the wisdom literature the fear of the Lord is the very beginning of wisdom.

The very beginning of the great way of salvation. So we better listen to God's words hadn't we? And heed Samuel's advice.

Direct your heart to the Lord and serve Him only and He will deliver you. out of the hand of your enemies. Let's pray.

[37 : 37] Heavenly Father we thank You that Your Word does not hide from us the truth even when it's a truth that we find so hard to hear and to read.

Help us we pray to know and to understand that You are truly holy. but to rejoice that You have shown us the way of holiness the path to Your holy hill.

Help us we pray to be humble before You in our hearts bowing the knee to Your Lord Jesus Christ the Word Himself incarnate come to us to lead us and guide us in that only way of saving grace and mercy.

Help us never to be careless with Him never to forget Him never to be those who cry Lord, Lord but do not heed Your words.

Humble us Lord open our ears and open our hearts and lead us we pray in that way everlasting. For Jesus' sake Amen.