

2. He's a Unique God

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[0 : 00] Well, this is it, and we're going to read together in the Bibles in 1 Samuel chapter 5. 1 Samuel chapter 5, and that's page 228 in these Bibles.

And if you were here last week, you'll remember we read chapter 4, which is a longer chapter. And it's the story of how the Ark of God was captured by the Philistines from the people of God, and how the Philistines were massacred in their battle.

And at the end of it, we saw that Eli, the old high priest, was so shocked at what had happened that he fell backwards and he died, his sons had been killed.

But what really upset him, what really caused him to really die of shock, quite literally, was the fact that the presence of God, the Ark of the Covenant, had been removed from God's people.

And we pick up the story here just in this little section, the beginning of chapter 5. When the Philistines captured the Ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod.

[1 : 15] That's one of the five cities of the Philistines. Then the Philistines took the Ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the Ark of the Lord.

So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. But when they rose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the Ark of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and both of his arms were lying cut off on the threshold.

Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

Well, keep your Bibles open and let's pray as we come to this word. Heavenly Father, you have by your Spirit given us this word of your truth.

We pray now that you would open our eyes to it and open our hearts that we might receive it as it truly is, not as the word of man, but as the very word of God that speaks to us of you, that calls us to bow our knee to you alone, because you are the only God.

[2 : 45] Hear us and speak to us, we pray, in Jesus Christ's name. Amen. Well, last week we began to look at this little story in 1 Samuel, all about the lost ark.

Don't be confused. It's not the Harrison Ford version, this is the true story. But actually, as we've already seen, it's just as exciting. In fact, it's far more exciting. And remember the story begins in the anarchic times of the judges.

Remember we saw at the end of that book two things. There's no king in Israel at that time. And even worse, there is no word from the Lord. The word of the Lord was scarce in those days. And where God's word and his rule are absent in any society, then, well, there's anarchy. First of all, morally, but ultimately, as we all begin to understand these days, ultimately, politically as well. And so we saw that 1 Samuel begins as a sense of a new beginning for God's people. Samuel is God's answer to that great problem, no word from the Lord.

[3 : 56] God is raising up in Samuel one who will speak again the word of God to his people. And, of course, as we read on in the book of 1 Samuel, we discover, ultimately, it's going to lead us to the answer of the need for a king, a man after God's own heart to rule God's people too.

So it's a book that begins with bright gleamings of new beginnings. And the first three chapters of the book really fill us with hope. Remember at the very end of chapter 3 last time, just look at the bottom of the page, 227, chapter 3, verse 21, the Lord appeared again at Shiloh.

Shiloh, that dreadful place where the priests, the sons of Eli, totally misbehaved, where God was being utterly forgotten, and yet in Samuel, God appeared again.

And so we're full of hope. And we turn the page, and it's chapter 4. Total disaster. Israel routed by the enemy Philistines, the ark of God captured, and quite literally the shock of that so affects Eli that the poor old man falls off his stool and breaks his neck and dies.

A catalogue of disaster. Why such disaster? Well, as we saw, God's people had to learn what many people have to learn, not to underestimate the God of the Bible.

[5 : 24] Something people constantly do, again and again, have done all through history. We underestimate the real magnitude of what it means to be careless of God, to ignore him, to rebel against him.

We think, in our arrogance, we think that we can make God into our servant. We can use God. We treat God rather like the genie of Aladdin's lamp, don't we?

He can be ignored, he can be abused, he can be forgotten. But in time of crisis, in time of trouble, well, he's always there. Always to hand, to be called up. And chapter 4, as we saw last time, is a rude shock to people who have that kind of attitude about God.

It tells us that you can't contain God like that. You can't ignore him. You can't score in any sense of real relationship with God and think that somehow if you just keep all the religious trappings, the Ark of the Covenant and the priesthood, then everything will be alright.

No, you can't. The Ark of God is no use at all to God's people if the God of the Ark is being systematically ignored. And they had to discover that.

[6 : 39] They had to discover that you can't control God. is if you can just presume upon all God's wonderful, gracious promises of his gospel and yet ignore all the commands of the gospel.

You can't just say, Lord, Lord, says Jesus and expect to inherit the kingdom. No, it's doing the will of the Father that matters. It's real heart, love, and obedience for God himself.

You can't just wheel out the Ark and say, Arise, Lord, and let your enemies be scattered. And at the same time, live in just total disregard of the God whose Ark it is.

You can't do that. And Israel had to learn that lesson. And it's a lesson that none of God's people can ignore, neither you nor me, because the New Testament tells us these things are written not for them, but they're written for us.

It happened to them, but they're recorded as warnings for God's people today. It's a warning that we should never forget that God is a sovereign God.

[7 : 43] He will not be used. Do not, friends, do not presume upon the God of the Bible. Don't take him for granted. Don't underestimate him.

But you know, when God judges his own people, as he did in chapter 4 here, that is not ever an invitation for the world outside to scoff and to gloat.

No, no. Because if God was teaching Israel a lesson, if he was teaching his own people a tough lesson there in chapter 4, well, my goodness, in chapter 5 and chapter 6, he's got to teach the Philistines a very tough lesson too.

He's got to teach them not only is he the sovereign God, but that he is the unique and the only God. And you know, that's a lesson that the world today still needs to learn.

That's a lesson that our society needs to learn just as much as the Philistine society did all those hundreds of years ago. That the God of the Bible is the God. He's the only God.

[8 : 51] He is unique. Do not think that the God of the Bible will be relativized. He will not yield his glory to another.

And don't think he can be neutralized. Even in apparent defeat, this God is working out his mighty purpose.

Just think about that first thing. God will not be relativized. That's really above all what this chapter 5 is telling us, that section we read. You see, the Philistines, they thought, they thought that after winning the battle against Israel, that either God and the ark was just a fraud, didn't really have any power at all, or else they thought that having captured him, this God was now going to be on their side and they would have his power.

That's what they thought. Remember back in chapter 4, verse 7, they were very afraid when they heard the ark was coming into the camp. A God is coming into the camp, they said.

Well, it's like so many people today, they had a kind of muddled theology, a muddled knowledge of God. They assumed that it worked like some kind of magic charm and if you had the ark, well, that was what really mattered.

[10:09] And then, of course, it all came to nothing and they defeated the Israelites and they thought, well, it's not true. We've captured it. It's got no power or at least we've got the power now. But my goodness, did they make a colossal mistake.

You see, to think that if somehow Israel couldn't use God, that they could, oh my, oh my, that was a real disaster.

They had another thing coming. They're going to learn the truth about the God of Israel just as God's own people had to learn the truth about the God of Israel. And these verses we read here, they're just full, aren't they?

They're full of God's humour. God is laughing his head off as he writes these words. The Bible is full of God's laughter, you know, you read it in place after place after place.

And so often it's laughter that's aimed at the pride and the pomposity and the sheer arrogance of our humanity as we think, well, as we think we can defy our maker.

[11:14] Psalm 2, do you remember the rulers, the kings of the earth, plotting together against God and his anointed and God sitting in heaven? Is he quaking? Is he falling off his throne? No, says the psalmist.

He who sits in the heavens laughs. The Lord has them in utter derision. And then you laugh and you smile inwardly as we read these verses. We should.

We're meant to. We're meant to mock Pearl Dagon. Did you see every second or third word virtually is Dagon. Ten times his name appears in here.

Mighty warrior Dagon. The great god of the warrior Philistines. Greeting his victorious armies as they come back from battle. The great Dagon. And in comes the ark of the god as a booty, as a spoil sitting beside him in his temple.

But next morning what does verse 3 say? Oh dear, poor old Dagon. Tossed straight on his face in front of the ark of God.

[12:19] How humiliating the mighty Dagon, the great warrior god of the Philistines. Just like an old man falling out of bed during the night. You just imagine them coming in in the morning and saying, dear me, we'll have to get him one of these alarms to put around his neck in case this happens again.

We can't have him lying all night. He'll catch a death of cold. Poor Dagon. It's just like Elijah on Mount Carmel, isn't it? Come on, shout louder. Maybe he's gone out to lunch. Perhaps he's in the lavatory.

Have a shout. Of course he can't hear. And God does mock, you know, he mocks the sheer folly, the idiocy of false man-made worship.

God is not politically correct. He mocks it and he exposes it for what it is. Or actually, he doesn't have to expose it for what it is because when it's faced with the reality of the presence of the living God, it exposes itself for sham and nothingness.

Just as Dagon did. And the next day it's even worse. Look at verse 4. Oh great Dagon, as they open the doors, how are you this morning, O mighty Lord? A voice from down on the floor, well actually, I've had a dreadful night, frankly.

[13:31] I'm quite shattered this morning. And he was, poor Dagon. Paracetamol wasn't any good. It was plastic surgery that he needed.

Total body makeover. Not only is he this time once again faced down in homage before the ark of the God of Israel, the true God, but his head's fallen off and his arms.

Utterly, utterly impotent. I mean, it's comic, isn't it? If it wasn't so deeply pathetic. It's man-made religion, man-made God shown up for what it is.

You know, the Philistines had thought like this. They'd said, well, let's be multicultural. And let's add this God, the God of Israel, to our collection of gods. He'll enrich our spiritual experience.

We'll have the best of both worlds. What a monumental misunderstanding. What a colossal error. You see, excuse me, the God of the Bible is unique.

[14:39] He is the only God. He will not be put in a queue alongside Dagon and all the rest of them. Is this ringing too loud? Can we turn it down a bit?

It's absolutely ridiculous, isn't it, to think of the God of heaven sharing a temple with another God? But that's what the world thinks today, isn't it? That's exactly what our society thinks.

The society outside thinks that the God of the Bible has been conquered. We think that God can't be given special status anymore. Not the Christian God, God of the Bible has been conquered.

He's got to be relegated. He's got to join the queue with all the other gods of this world, with Buddha and with Krishna and with Allah and Mohammed and then with all these other things, guiding spirits and crystals and gurus and all that sort of mumbo-jumbo.

That's what the world thinks. If you go into Borders Bookshop and go into the spirituality section, they're all there, all in the same rows. Bit of that, bit of this, bit of the next thing, all mixed in together, multi-faith, enriched by all the different cultures and all the rest of it.

[15:52] That's what people say. Well, none of us has an absolute claim on the truth, do we? Of course. So what matters is faith. What matters is spirituality.

That's what Prince Charles thinks, isn't it? When he's going to be king, he doesn't want to be defender of the faith. I want to be defender of faith because Dagon and Jesus and Allah and Krishna and mumbo-jumbo, it's all the same.

That's what people today think. So the advert for the psychic fair that I saw in a hall near us, that's just as good as yoga spirituality and transcendental meditation and the mosque and the Scientologists and the church and Dagon.

It's all the same. But you see, what this passage of Scripture tells us loud and clear through a megaphone is no, that's not true.

That's wrong. The absolute opposite is true. You're wrong, you modern, post-modern western people, God says. You're mistaken. You're deluded if you think that.

[17:06] These gods here in this temple, the God of Israel and Dagon, they're not all holding hands around a lighted candle chanting when they come in the morning. No. Dagon is flattened in pieces before the true God, the God of heaven.

And the Bible says to us, you human beings in the 21st century, when you think like that, you're just like those foolish Philistines.

You're just the same. And that's what God showed to these pagan Philistines. He made it absolutely abundantly clear to them. Dagon got the message, but it seems all the rest of them didn't.

What should their response have been? They should have followed the example, of their God Dagon, shouldn't they? They should have been flat on their faces, bowing down before the God of Israel.

But as you read on in chapter 5, of course, you find the opposite. They wanted rid of this God. They couldn't stomach a God like this with real power. But they had no excuse.

[18:07] God had given them absolutely abundant evidence. He had shown them who is the true God. But still, they rejected. And friends, you know, God hasn't just shown that to Philistines thousands of years ago.

He has displayed that to all the world. And he's shown it far, far more clearly and left the world with far, far less excuse than those Philistines in that day.

We have got far less excuse for not bowing down to the God of heaven than they have. Just let me read to you from Acts chapter 17. You might want to turn it up.

It's page 927. In fact, it would be good to turn it up. Page 927. This is the Apostle Paul. This is the New Testament. This is Paul speaking in Athens, in the very centre of knowledge of the ancient world.

And yet, what's his message to them? You are unspeakably ignorant. That's what he tells them. Listen to what Paul says. This is to the columnist, the Athenian spectator, the Macedonian guardian, the today programme presenters of the ancient world, it's the academics, it's the dons, it's all the intellectuals.

[19:30] And what does Paul say in verse 29? I'm afraid you're all quite ignorant. Do you see that? Being God's offspring, we ought not to think the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination, of man.

You're all without excuse, he says. Verse 30, in the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to recognize and rejoice in pluralistic religion, to say that's fine for you, but I worship my God my way.

Is that what God says? No. No. He calls all people everywhere, whatever country, whatever ethnicity, whatever religious background, all people everywhere to do what?

To repent. To repent of their ignorance and to recognize that he is the one unique and only God. To recognize that he has unique authority over all the world, to judge the world.

And what's the proof, says Paul? Well, the proof, friends, for the world is not just a prostrate Dagon with no head and no arms on the floor.

[20 : 50] What's the proof? It's a man raised from the dead. Of this he gives assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

That's the proof that he's the only God. And what are the consequences, says Paul, of ignoring this irrefutable proof of the uniqueness of God, of the unique lordship of Jesus Christ?

Well, it's far worse, isn't it, than the plagues that came on the Philistines that we'll read about next time. What is it? Eternal judgment. He has fixed a day when he will judge the world in righteousness.

Dear friends, the message of the whole Bible is the same, the Old Testament, the New Testament, wherever you look, God will not be relativized. He will not share his glory with another.

Don't ignore his gracious warnings. Don't underestimate the God of the Bible. God will not be relativized, whether it's in Philistia, 3,000 years ago, whether it's in Athens in the first century, or whether it's Glasgow today.

[22 : 06] God will not be placed on a row among all the gods made up by the world. He is the unique and only God. And this God will not be neutralized either.

Don't ever think, don't let anybody tell you that the God of the Bible has been defeated, even if sometimes it seems that way, even if it seems to the world outside that God's people have been utterly defeated, don't believe that the God of the Bible has been defeated.

He will not be neutralized. God can look after himself. His purposes are never, ever thwarted. Whatever sociologists want to tell us about the decline of Christianity, I was listening to one on the radio just the other day, explaining away completely the church growth in the two-thirds world. Completely wrong. God will never be defeated. All the circumstantial evidence in this passage pointed to that, didn't it? Everything pointed to the death of the God of Israel.

That's what the world's been telling us for decades, isn't it? God is dead. Just the sort of things cynics have been saying and go on saying. And you know, as Christian people, we can begin to believe it.

[23 : 23] We can in the West, when we begin to see churches closed, when we see people scorning God, we can begin to believe that God has been gradually neutralized.

Don't you think that sometimes? It's easy. But in fact, when all the evidence suggested here that God had been defeated, what was God doing?

He was storming the very inner citadel of the powers of his enemies, the very house of Dagon, and he was demonstrating his own supreme power and his supreme victory in the very heart of the house of his enemy.

Things were the absolute opposite of the way they seemed. Don't ever think that God is defeated just because we can't see his power at work all the time.

God can't be neutralized. He is the only God. But he's other than we think. He moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform.

[24 : 26] But we must never, ever think he's lost control. I don't know, but maybe some of us here this lunchtime just need to hear that word afresh.

Maybe it seems like God doesn't have any power in his church today. Maybe it seems like he's defeated. Maybe there's something in your own personal life that makes you doubt whether God really has power to help you, to love you, to nurture you.

Maybe it feels that way. Well, let me tell you, it's not so. The powers of darkness never, ever, ever have the last word with this God.

But it may often seem as if that's so, at least on the surface. But friends, should we be surprised by that? Surely not.

Isn't that the hallmark of how this God works? what was the darkest ever hour in the history of this world? Wasn't it when the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, was hung on a cross, nails driven into his hands, and the darkness came over, and he cried, it is finished, and he died?

[25 : 46] Wasn't that the darkest hour, and the apparent hour of the greatest victory of every enemy of God and his people? Wasn't it? that's what his enemies thought.

That's what his friends thought. That's what the disciples believed. But was it? Things were not as they seemed.

At that very moment, God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, destroying his enemies, proclaiming victory on behalf of his people. people.

In that dreadful darkness, God was storming the very citadels of darkness. This God cannot be neutralized.

What did Peter say? This man you crucified by the hands of lawless men. But it's all according to God's sovereign design.

[26 : 46] This God cannot be neutralized. Even when it seems that he is utterly defeated, he is always working out his miraculous, powerful victories for the sake of his kingdom, of his people, and above all the glory of his name.

And that's why this God will never be relativized. He'll never ever yield his glory to another. He is the unique God. He's the only God.

Don't ever underestimate the God of the Bible. No, do what the Philistines did not do.

Acknowledge him and bow to him. You can do so gladly. You can do it now, today, and every day in your life. You can do it with joy. Or, if you will not do that, you will do it ultimately, but then it would not be with joy.

There'd be no joy on that day for those who bow the knee when they're overcome with the power and might of the appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ because they've been enemies.

[28 : 06] One way or another, every creature will bow the knee. So, friends, don't underestimate the God of the Bible.

Listen to his word and make the right choice. Bow the knee with joy before the unique God and the only God.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, in this world of many competing gods, in the imaginations of our hearts and minds, we pray that this light would shine brightly into our hearts to teach us that you are the God of gods, the Lord of lords, the King of kings, and that you have given us proof by raising Jesus Christ from the dead.

And I pray that every one of us here today, on the day when he comes as judge of the living and the dead, would see that day with rejoicing because we have bowed the knee to him now and known him as our wonderful God and saviour.

So come to our hearts, we pray, Lord Jesus Christ, for we ask it in your name. Amen. Amen.