

3. He's a Disturbing God

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[0 : 00] Well, if you'd like to open your Bibles with me to page 226, we'll come to our reading today in chapter 5 of 1 Samuel a little bit later, but just want you to have it open there at chapter 2 to begin with.

This is our third study in the story of the Lost Ark. Much more exciting than Steven Spielberg and Harrison Ford, and it's true.

And not only is it an exciting story, but it is a real message from God to us, to his people today. Do you remember what Paul writes to the church in Rome all those years ago?

Whatever was written in the former days, he says, days of Samuel and so on, were written for our instruction, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures, we, today, might have hope.

And so this is relevant for us. And of course, we don't have to look very far, do we, to see just how relevant it is for us today in the 21st century in Britain, because we've already seen that the setting of this story is in the midst of great confusion in society and in the church about God, about the things of God, about the things of God.

[1 : 21] In 1 Samuel here, it wasn't just the pagan world round about, the Philistines, who had just the vaguest understanding of God and his ways, but God's own people, his church, had almost completely lost the truth as well.

So, the leaders of the church who were to speak for God, well, they were completely clueless. In fact, it was even worse than that.

They had deliberately abandoned the truth and the rule of God. They had turned the centre of God's worship into the very centre of corruption. Just look at chapter 2, verse 12 there.

They're Eli's sons, they were the chief clergymen of the day, and we're told they're worthless men.

They're men who don't even know the Lord. Verse 22 shows how appalling their behaviour was.

They just pleased themselves, sleeping with the women who served at the place of worship, took complete advantage of these women who were serving the temple of God.

[2 : 26] There's a very contemporary ring about that, isn't there? We're always being embarrassed, aren't we, with stories about clergymen abusing their position for sexual satisfaction.

It's always in the newspapers. Brings nothing but scorn, of course, doesn't it, on God himself?

When people whose job it is meant to be to teach the truth of God turn so far away and become worthless men like that.

But we see it, don't we? Verse 18 of chapter 2 tells us that their sin was very great in God's eyes. Because not only did they do these things, they treated the offering, the sacrifices of the Lord with contempt.

You see, that's all part and parcel of a very common pattern, isn't it? These things always tend to go together. False living and false teaching and scorn of the sacrifices of God.

It's all part of the package when we fail to take sin seriously against the holiness of God.

[3 : 34] The essence of sin, isn't it, is self-worship. Isn't that right? It's self-assertion. It's self-satisfaction. It's putting myself right at the very centre of the universe and putting God right far away on the periphery of my universe, if he's anywhere at all, even on the radar screen.

That's the heart of sin. And of course, when you do that, you must therefore downplay and almost completely ignore the importance of sin.

And that always leads us, doesn't it, to a perversion of the truth of God. We have to undermine the authority of God's word because we can't have it accusing us.

And it also leads to disdain and contempt for the offering of God. The whole concept of any need for atonement for sin, well, that's not something we can have anything to do with.

In our New Testament language, it simply means we scorn the cross of Christ, the offering of God, and we scorn the authority of scriptures. That was there in the days of 1 Samuel.

[4 : 42] It was there right through the New Testament. It's always talking about it. Paul says to Timothy, people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.

So they'll turn aside from the truth, they'll turn to myths. That's our world today, isn't it? It's no different from the world of 1 Samuel, of Eli and his sons.

You want to have sexual fulfillment any way you want? Well, let's have leaders in the church like Eli's sons. We're very happy to bless your lifestyle, and more than happy probably to join in with it too.

We can have leaders who are delighted to dress up in all sorts of religious garb, and talk all the time about religious ceremonies. We love institutional religion, just as long as you can behave any which way you choose.

That's the world today, that was the world then. The world hasn't changed. But you see, when people think like that, God says to them, you may not care about sin, but I do.

[5 : 59] It's very great in my sight, because you are treating the offering of God with contempt. And ultimately, of course, that means that we're treating with contempt the ultimate offering of God, the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that's why leaders of God's people, especially, as well as everybody else, that's why we need to hear these warnings. If these sins led to judgment for Eli's sons, and they did, we've seen that already, the New Testament says to us, very clearly, listen, quote, how much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?

That's Hebrews chapter 10, that was written to a New Testament church, like us here. He goes on to say, it's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. And you see, that's what this story of the lost ark in the Old Testament is all about.

The New Testament writers tell us this is written for us, and here it is. That's the situation at the very beginning of 1 Samuel. The situation is absolutely dire.

It's one of moral confusion, it's one of religious corruption, just like today. But God is at work, just as God is at work today, to restore his name, and to restore his people.

[7 : 35] Samuel himself is part of the answer. He's being raised up as a man to speak God's words, his truth. Do you remember the end of chapter 3, verse 21, bottom of the page there? The Lord appeared again at Shiloh.

He spoke through Samuel. But of course, God is not a God of the quick fix. There's no cheap grace with God.

God doesn't say, right, let's go for maximum church growth to get out of this situation. Let's become really seeker friendly. Let's become really softly, softly, to try and get people back in where they've abandoned the church.

Let's do God-light. Let's attract people back who are miles away, and they'll never be attracted by the old ways of godliness. Let's adapt ourselves to this new Pomo society, post-Mosaic society. We've forgotten all the old ways. We don't want that truth. Is that what God does? No, we discover in these chapters that God does precisely the opposite.

[8 : 41] Chapter 4 was a gruesome story, wasn't it? Do you remember a couple of weeks ago? He taught his own people a very, very tough lesson, that this God of the Bible, the real God, is a sovereign God.

He won't be used. You can't control him and contain him. Never. Even to think like that leads to disaster. Disaster is exactly what happened to God's people.

Then last time, we looked at the beginning of chapter 5, and we saw that the pagan world, the Philistines, well, they were taught a real lesson too. This God of the Bible can't be disregarded by the pagan world.

No. They've got to learn he's the God, the unique God, the only God. He won't be relativized along with other gods. He can't be neutralized as though he can be defeated and be brought onto your side.

Never. He's always at work having victory over his enemies. And now you see, if we turn to chapter 5 and verse 6, we see that in the rest of this chapter and halfway through chapter 6, the poor

Philistines have to learn another lesson.

[9 : 50] They have to learn that this God, the real God, the God of Scripture, is a very disturbing God. When the world discovers the real truth about this God, they discover that he's far, far too hot to handle.

And the message for us, friends, is very clear. Don't ever think that a close, personal encounter with this God will ever be easy.

We think that, we just need to read this story. Let's read it together now. Verse 6 of chapter 5. The hand of God was very heavy against the people of Ashdod.

And he terrified and afflicted them with tumours, both Ashdod and its territory. And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon, our God.

So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel? They answered, Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought round to Gath.

[11 : 00] So they brought the ark of the God of Israel there, but after they brought it around, the hand of the Lord was against the city, causing a very great panic. And he afflicted the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumours broke out on them.

So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. But as soon as the ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, They brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people. They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, Send away the ark of the God of Israel. Let it return to its own place that it might not kill us and our people. For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city.

The hand of God was very heavy there. The men who did not die were struck with tumours and the cry of the city went up to heaven. The ark of the Lord was in the country of the Philistines seven months and the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, What shall we do with the ark of the Lord?

Tell us with what shall we send it to its place? They said, If you send it away, the ark of the God of Israel, don't send it empty but by all means return with him a guilt offering.

[12 : 09] Then you will be healed and it will be known to you why this hand does not turn away from you. And they said, What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him? They answered, Five golden tumours and five golden mice according to the number of the lords of the Philistines for the same plague was on all of you and your lords.

So you must make images of your tumours and images of your mice that ravage the land and give glory to the God of Israel. Perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land. Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After they had dealt severely with them did they not send the people away and they departed? Now then, take and prepare a new cart and two milk cows on which there has never come a yoke and yoke a cow to the cart but take their calves home away from them and take the ark of the Lord and place it on the cart and put in its box at its side the figures of gold which you are returning to him as a guilt offering.

Then send it off and let it go its way and watch. If it goes up on the way to its own land to Beth Shemesh then it is he that is the God of Israel who has done this great harm to us.

But if not then we shall know that it's not his hand that struck us it happened to us by coincidence. The men did so and took two milk cows and yoked them to the cart and shut up their calves at home and they put the ark of the Lord on the cart and the box for the golden mice and images of their tumours and the cows went straight in the direction of Beth Shemesh along one highway blowing as they went and turned neither to the right nor to the left and the lords of the Philistines went after them as far as the border of Beth Shemesh that is the border of the land of Israel.

[14 : 00] Well now that story that we've read there would really be rather comical wouldn't it if it wasn't so serious. Here's Israel's land God's people totally sidelined defeated in battle redundant the glory of God departed from them God's people sidelined and scorned by the pagan world just I suppose like the church often is today and yet is God helpless?

Not a bit of it. God is on their rampage all on his own he's off in his ark storming the citadels of all his enemies the Philistines. They have totally underestimated him.

They think maybe the God of Israel is powerless or they think maybe they've captured him and now he'll be on their side they've tamed him. What a huge mistake that was.

They discover instead that this God is far too hot to handle don't they? They just can't cope with his deeply disturbing presence in their midst.

The true and living God you see when it's discovered what he is really like is very very disturbing. And that's why their constant refrain is there as verse 8 isn't it?

[15 : 19] What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel? It's there again and again. How on earth can we get rid of this God? Again that's just exactly like today isn't it?

When people really begin to encounter the God of Scripture as he actually is not as how they imagined him to be when they really begin to hear the Bible taught maybe they come to a course and they really begin to see what the word of God says about God very often they discover he's far too hot to handle they want to get rid of him just like the Philistines so here we are in verse 7 we can't have this in Ashdod let's send him to Gath no we can't have this in Gath let's send him to Ekron no said the people from Ekron let's send him away far away never to come back you see the real God of Scripture has never been very acceptable anywhere on this earth whether in Philistia or in Scotland isn't that why we find today that so often there's a great temptation to try and sanitize God isn't that right in our evangelism to try and make God a bit more acceptable to our modern world our post-modern world isn't that why there's a great temptation in courses about the gospel and so on to talk down sin to talk down

God's holiness and God's wrath and the need for atonement it's because you see the real God of the Bible is a deeply disturbing God and when we tell it like it is people just don't know how to handle it I don't know if you saw the film of Narnia it was a great film of the lion the witch and the wardrobe there was just one little bit in it that disappointed me and that was a line that was missed out one of the best lines in the book when the children ask Mrs. Beaver about Aslan the lion and they say to him is he a tame lion it draws the most shocked reaction from Beaver tame no he's not a tame lion he is good and the God of the Bible is not a tame God nor is he a tameable God the Philistines found his presence far far too disturbing that's why they banished and that's why we have this ridiculous pantomime about these golden tumors and these golden mice as though somehow that was going to be pleasing to God just shows you doesn't it how when the people of this world are left to their own devices about how to please God they're so so wide of the mark they had some sort of vague sense that a guilt offering was needed says that in verse 3 and 4 we need a guilt offering some vague sense in verse 5 that they needed to give glory to the God of Israel but had absolutely no understanding of how you did these things I mean golden tumors can you believe it just imagine somebody came to your house for dinner and said I've got a lovely present for you but I pop it in the kitchen oh what is it flowers no it's a gold plated model of my prostate tumor I had it out last month it's grotesque but the world just doesn't know how to handle the true God of scripture get rid of him fast is the main response nothing has changed you know when the same God came in the flesh of Jesus Christ to the people in Gadara Mark chapter 5 what did they say they pleaded with him to leave he couldn't cope with his ministry what did they say in John chapter 6 when Jesus explained to them the truth about what it really meant to follow him the radical nature of discipleship many turned back and left him that's just the same today when the real God of the Bible is made known in Jesus Christ when he explains what it really means to be holy to follow him when people discover that the God of the Bible actually will turn your life totally upside down and there's no other way what do people say no thanks anything but that you see people will put up with and rejoice in and revel in any amount of religion as long as it doesn't force you to change the way you actually live the things you think the things you do that's why so often people end up saying send away the ark of the God of Israel it was G.K.

[20 : 10] Chesterton that said Christianity has not been tried and found wanting it's been found difficult and left untried and that was the Philistines you see they were happy to have the God of the Bible along with their own gods until they discovered what the God of the Bible was really like and when they discovered that they said send him away send him far away back to his own place and that was the people in the land of Philistia three thousand years ago and that's many people in the land of Scotland and the city of Glasgow today maybe that's you but listen God reveals himself so clearly to these Philistine people yes he reveals himself in judgment the hand of the Lord was heavy against them but listen he also reveals himself clearly to them in mercy that's the whole point of this escapade with the cows verses 7 to 12 you see they're looking for confirmation they don't know if all

these plagues have just been coincidence or whether it really is the one true

God of Israel that is on the rampage against them so we'll put the ark in a cart we'll put up two new cows we'll make it as difficult for them as possible to go back to the land of Israel any normal cows would go straight back to their calves in the stall wouldn't they totally abnormal for them to go the other way but if they did do that if that test was passed well then at last we would know this truly was the one true God what happens verse 12 straight back to the borders of Israel neither to the right nor to the left God could not have shouted louder to these Philistines of course it's me you idiots that's what he's saying of course it's me that is the one true God who smashed your Dagon and is inflicted of course it's me that was God proclaiming his gospel to these people shouting to them I am the one true God recognize it do you see how condescending

God is how good and kind he is even to people who are totally his enemies people who wanted nothing to do with him who are trying to get rid of him God is shouting I am the one true God open your eyes he made it absolutely clear beyond any shadow of a doubt who he was but do they respond do they bow down and worship no what do they do they want to get rid of him they want to rebuild their God Dagon on they prefer to deliberately turn their back on the truth and just re-enter the delusion of godless paganism it was Churchill who said men occasionally stumble over the truth but most of them pick themselves up and hurry on as if nothing had ever happened it's so true isn't it we human beings have almost an infinite capacity of self delusion it's quite staggering God has made his truth so abundantly clear in this world and he's made clear to us the consequences of abandoning his truth and going against him and still so often we prefer to collude in utter self delusion we see it all around us today just in our society God says to us no adultery and we say no we want sexual freedom thank you very much the consequences are all around us family breakups unwanted children misery God says to us no murder and we say no thanks we prefer to think life is cheap so we have 200,000 abortions a year in this country we're pushing euthanasia through the statute books God says to us no coveting and we say no thank you very much greed and exploitation makes the world go round should we be surprised that we have a world of oppression and sex slavery and corporate scandals and all sorts of things on and on and on it's absolutely plain and obvious

God is shouting with a megaphone and yet in the face of all of that evidence we just do exactly what the Philistines did constantly reassert our discredited man-made religions and philosophies secularism atheism freedom all of these things it's so pathetic it's all just human beings taking their shattered broken gods sticking them back together with glue and putting them back on the pedestal it's just picking up Dagon and putting him back in his place and banishing far away the true and the living God let him go away and never come back that's Britain today that's the western world today we never learn from our history weeks because as Paul says in Romans chapter one we've exchanged the truth of God for a lie and so

[25 : 41] God has given us over to our sinful desires to our shameful lusts to our depraved minds why because we cannot handle the true God of the Bible he's far too disturbing he turns your life upside down he turns society upside down if we take him seriously so friends let me just say two things as I close first of all if you're a Christian and you're seeking to share the gospel with other people you need to be realistic or else you're going to get very despondent don't be surprised if there are people who at first they seem interested they seem to welcome the gospel of Jesus but then when they really begin to see the implication understand who the God of the Bible really is they turn around and they say no thanks send away the ark of the covenant of the gospel of God the Bible is disturbing you see it turns people's lives upside down and people find it far too disturbing maybe joy at first but then rejection that's why

Jesus told us to expect that in the parable of the sower you'll find that people are very happy to have a little bit of God in their life but you know that God can never save them so don't be tempted to keep people on board by changing your God don't do that it's only the true God of scripture who can save and he does save but don't be surprised when people reject and secondly if you're not a Christian this is a word for you don't think you can be a Christian without total disturbance in your life don't think you can follow Jesus without him turning your world on its head upside down don't think an encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ can ever be easy it can't be anything other than life shaking the God of the

Bible is not a tame God and you can't tame him but he is good he is wonderfully good and kind and gracious and merciful he shows himself he shouts even to his enemies to Philistines and even his

enemies don't have to send him away he doesn't want you to send him away he wants to stay he wants to make you a friend that's why ultimately he sent not just his ark into enemy territory but he sent his son the Lord Jesus Christ the living word into the world of his enemies as a true guilt offering so that clueless godless pagan enemies of God could bring glory to the one true God of Israel by bowing the knee before his son the Lord Jesus

Christ if you're an enemy you don't have to remain one he will turn your life upside down he's a disturbing God but you'll never look back you'll never look back but don't send him away he can change everything and he will don't underestimate the God of the Bible let's pray gracious heavenly father we repent of how lightly we consider your ways and how easily we seek to remove you from our consciousness just because you are a God who is holy and so disturbing to us as sinners but we praise you that your word comes as a shaft of light into our darkness offering grace and mercy and forgiveness and eternal salvation and security even for enemies so help us we pray to bow the knee to our

Lord Jesus Christ not to send him away but to listen to his word as he says come to me all of you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest may we so come today for we ask it in his name Amen