

4. He's a Holy God

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Date: 28 June 2006

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[0 : 00] It's page 229, 1 Samuel chapter 6, and we're going to read from verse 13. We're familiar now with these exciting stories about the lost ark, and here we reach the conclusion today of this little episode.

Although, of course, not the end of the book of Samuel, which is a very exciting one indeed. And you might want to read on for your own study.

But let's read 1 Samuel 6, verse 13, page 229. This is after the ark has been doing its travels in the land of the Philistines, and at last, taken by these cattle in the truck, it's arrived back in Israel, a place called Beth Shemesh.

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. And 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.

[1 : 21] And the men of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrifices on that day to the Lord. And when the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned that day to Ekron.

No doubt with a hearty sense of relief. These are the golden chewers that the Philistines returned as a guilt offering to the Lord. One for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron.

And the golden mice, according to the numbers of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and walled 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 struck some of the men of Beth Shemesh because they looked upon the ark of the Lord. He struck seventy men of them. And the people mourned because the Lord had struck the people with a great blow.

That means, of course, these men were struck dead. Then 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?

[2 : 36] So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-Jerim, saying, The Philistines have returned the ark of the Lord. Come down and take it up to you. And the men of Kiriath-Jerim came and took up the ark of the Lord and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill.

And they consecrated his son, Eliezer, to have charge of the ark of the Lord. From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-Jerim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.

Keep your Bibles open and let's pray before we come to look at this. Heavenly Father, once again we gather from the busyness of the street outside, from our places of work, our offices, perhaps our homes, and we take this time to consciously turn our minds, our hearts, our whole being to you, the living God.

We know we need you, Lord. We know that without your word we perish. And so we ask that even in our confusion, in our concerns, in the midst of our busy lives and families, the many things that fill our minds this day, we ask that you would, for this time, clear our minds and make our ears ready to hear your words to us today.

because we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we come to this final study in our story of the lost ark and at last today we find that the ark finds its way home after its long journeys.

[4 : 30] Not exactly truly home to where it should be at the heart of the tabernacle, but at least back in the land of Israel, away from the enemies and no longer totally alien and separated from God's

people.

So what has this story all been about? Well, let's just remember and remind ourselves. This story takes place, doesn't it, at a time of great confusion about the things of God.

It's rather like today. There's often a lot of talk about God and about spirituality, but both within the church and outside the church, a huge amount of misunderstanding.

I think we've got to say that's the state of play today too. In fact, there was so much misunderstanding and vagueness about what God was really like in this story that the people of God themselves were guilty of totally misunderstanding and totally underestimating what God was really like.

What was the reason for that? I remember back to chapter 3, verse 1. The word of God had been virtually forgotten in that society. The word of the Lord was rare in those days, we're told.

[5 : 43] And it was rare because the religious leaders, the priests and the Levites, the clergy of the day, if you like, the people whose job it was to teach the word of God to the people, well, they themselves had rejected God's word.

They'd neglected it and they'd abused it. They didn't want God's word interfering with their own lives, telling them what to do and so they saw no need to make God's word interfere with anybody else's life.

And the result was that God's people had become totally ignorant of God's word and therefore they were totally ignorant of God and his ways.

And so were all the nations round about. Remember, the whole purpose of Israel was that it would be the land and the people, the nation that reflected God's glory to the world so that the truth of God would be known in all the nations round about.

But in fact, Israel had become so ignorant and confused, well, how on earth could anybody else be expected to know about God if they knew nothing themselves? And I'm afraid that's been a common pattern of God's people from that day until this.

[6 : 56] Old Testament and New Testament and the church today. I mean, why is our society today so ignorant of God? Well, I'm afraid the answer is because the church so often has been so confused and ignorant about God's word.

No wonder the world doesn't listen when the church itself is confused. And when the people of God are ignorant about God's word, they are also inevitably ignorant about God and his ways because the way God makes himself known is through his words.

No other way. You can't know God unless he tells you about himself and we listen. So it's not surprising when we read as we did last week in chapter 2, verse 12 that the priest, Eli's son, didn't know the Lord.

Well, how could they? They never bothered to listen to him. So that's the situation. Here we are in a society in those days with an apostate church, if you like, and a totally ignorant and confused world all round about.

And so you see, when God does begin to take action to redeem the situation, note I'd in answer to the prayers of many of the faithful ones like Hannah, you can read her wonderful prayer in chapter 2 of 1 Samuel.

[8 : 13] Well, when God begins to act to redeem the situation, everybody is going to get a nasty shock, aren't they? Both the church and the world are going to be shocked because they're going to discover the truth about God.

they're going to discover you can't just have a little bit of God back in your life just like that and everything will be dandy. Nor can you just say, well, we'll go straight back to the glory days of revival of religion.

No, it doesn't work like that, I'm afraid. In fact, it's quite the reverse. When God is on the move, when God is on the move to do something new in Israel, to bring about the onward march of his great redemption, or when God is on the move doing something in his church today to push forward his great plan of salvation throughout all the world to usher in the second coming of his Son, when God begins to move in power wherever it is, he begins to speak and to act to reveal himself and to reveal himself as he really is, not as the make-believe that people have come to understand.

And so he confronts his own people in the church and he confronts the world. And what confronts them is really quite a shocking reality. It's not what anybody expects.

The world and the church discover that this God, this God of the Bible is not like a genie that pops out of Aladdin's lamp when you call him. He can't be contained and controlled by men and women. [9 : 49] He's a sovereign God. He won't be used by us. That's what we saw in chapter 4, wasn't it? We need to learn that lesson today. The world and the church discovers that the God of the Bible is not just one God among many who can be downgraded and shared.

No, he will not be relativized. He will not be neutralized. He's unique. He's the one true and living God. That's why Dagon falls down on his face, shattered in front of the Ark of God.

The world and the church discovers also that he's not a tame God. He's not a passive God who won't cause any upset in your life. No, quite the reverse.

He's a disturbing God. He'll turn your world upside down when you have an encounter with him. That's what we saw last time, wasn't it? The Philistines found that this God was just too hot to handle.

They could not get rid of him fast enough. But the story is not quite over yet. This passage today tells us about the return of the Ark and it teaches us another hard lesson.

[10 : 58] Another hard lesson about something we also today have forgotten all too easily. Just as the men of Beth Shemesh had forgotten it in that day.

And that is this. This God, the God of the Bible, is a holy God. He's not an easy-ozy, anything goes, anything will do, child of the 60s sort of God.

Much as we might like him to be that today. He's a holy God and he's a holy God who can only be approached on his own terms.

So don't ever think that you can have the blessing of his presence without a wholehearted submission to obedience to him and his word.

Don't think like that, says this passage that we just read, or you too will be guilty of underestimating the God of the Bible. It's a warning to us and we need it.

[11 : 59] So let's look at this last bit of the story here as it begins in verse 13. Can you see? At first, it seems very strange and unfair to us, doesn't it, when we read verse 18 about what happened to these men of Beth Shemesh.

Here are these guys that are going about their lawful business, they're in the middle of harvest, they're driving their combine harvesters up and down the field and what do they see? It's the ark of the Lord.

The ark of the Lord which had been taken off us by the Philistines which we'd lost. It's coming home and they can hardly believe it and we read that they're full of joy. Absolutely full of joy.

They must celebrate. It's not such good news for the cows, unfortunately, they go straight on the barbecue and they chop up the cart to make charcoal. But all their instinct seems to be good, doesn't it?

They want to make an offering to the Lord, they want to give joy and thanksgiving, they want to celebrate. The Lord has come back among us, his ark that was lost has come back. We're great about celebrations in the church today, aren't we?

[13 : 06] We're always talking about it, great bonanzas, celebrations, but these men really did have something to celebrate. The ark of the Lord signifying the presence of the living God was back in the land, back among his people.

The Philistines see it in verse 16, they've been looking on desperate to know what will happen and they no doubt slink off home saying thank goodness that's the end of that uncomfortable episode that we've been having.

And then verse 18, the people come out and they admire these golden offerings that the Philistines had given them, verse 17. All these golden tumors and golden mice, you can just imagine them going home and look darling, I'm home, look I brought you a lovely present, it's a golden tumor, just what I've always wanted.

I love those golden tumors. Or a mouse! I mean, well there you are, some ideas for you. But if you were writing verse 19, look, don't you think you would write it this way?

And so, they all lived happily ever after. Or something like that. I think that's what you'd put, wouldn't it? The Philistines have gone back, the ark's back in the land, everyone's got golden tumors, and so they all lived happily ever after.

[14 : 26] But that's not what's there, is it? Suddenly, bang! Disaster hits the men of Bethshemah. Seventy of them slaughtered, fall down dead at the hand of God.

Just like that. What's going on? I mean, it seems very bizarre, it seems impossible, it almost seems wicked, unjust.

But no, it's not just random, you see. See, just like everybody else in this story that we've seen over the last few weeks, just like everybody else, the men of Bethshemesh 2 are guilty of underestimating God.

They just assumed that because God had been gracious in sending back the ark to them, that somehow he no longer cared about the sin of his people. He no longer cared about things like obedience to his holy laws.

No, he's become a God who turns a blind eye to sin and will bless his people anyway. That's what they thought. They said to themselves something like this, well, our God is a God of love.

[15:37] He'll never be angry. A God of love can't be interested in that sort of old-fashioned Bible stuff, all these rules and regulations that are so out of date, so passé in sophisticated, chic, modern-day Beth Shemesh.

That's the sort of thing they were saying, that was their thinking. And people's thinking hasn't changed all that much, has it? They just assumed that God had become pretty easygoing these days.

He must be. Everybody else is. God wants to get a look in. He better wise up like the rest of us. That's what people say. And you see, that's why they just decided they could hang loose with God. They could hang loose with God and his ark and, well, they expected him to hang loose with them and, hey, they would just have a celebration and everything would be fine. But 70 of them discovered how completely wrong that was.

They discovered you just can't hang loose in your own way with God because he's a holy God and he will only be approached on his own terms.

[16:47] And that's why these men died for looking at the ark. Seems such a trivial thing to us. What on earth is wrong with that? Isn't it natural to want to satisfy your curiosity and see this holy thing?

Well, yes, it is natural, isn't it? But the problem is that things that come naturally to us might not be things that are right in the eyes of God. Isn't that right?

Plenty of things come naturally to me, I can tell you that are very definitely not right things for me to do. I guess it's the same with you. How do I know that what comes naturally to me is not right?

Well, because God tells me they're wrong even when I feel that they're right. And that is the point of the issue here. God is a holy God and holiness is dangerous.

If you get God's holiness too close to you and to me who are sinful causes a terrible reaction. Come too close to the holiness of God and you get burned up.

[17:51] You die. And that's why way back in the boring old thing called the Bible the men of Beth Shemesh should have remembered that God had written some things about getting too close to his ark.

Now we'll turn back to page 111 in the book of Numbers page 112 rather. Numbers chapter 4 God had given very careful laws to protect his people from his holiness.

The whole chapter there we won't read it all the whole chapter Numbers chapter 4 speaks about elaborate coverings for the holy things in the tabernacle and especially for the ark of God so that people would be protected from the consuming power of God's holiness.

Even the priests even Aaron himself the high priest could not look upon the ark even for a moment. Listen to verse 17 The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron saying Let not the tribes 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.

[19:17] You see? Why did God give those commands? He gave those commands because he's a God of love. He wants to protect his people from their sin.

That's why he commanded Moses to write this down. That's why he commanded the people to teach it to their children and their grandchildren to teach them all of God's life-giving laws so that they would live so that they wouldn't be judged for their sin in the presence of a holy God.

But you see people always know better than God don't they? We do today and they did then. And people underestimate God and they specially underestimate his holiness and his demand for

absolute purity.

And so they presume upon God and that's what these men did. They forgot they forgot that God yes is a God of grace and of mercy and of love. God is a God God but that's why he tells us how we can approach him how we can respond to him and still live.

And the answer is we can only approach him his way not our own way if we want to be protected from the consuming fire of his holiness. God's holiness is dangerous it's fatally dangerous for sinful people and that's what these men discovered.

[20 : 46] But like so many people among God's professing church his professing people today the men of Beth Shemesh had forgotten all that. They thought they worshipped God Almighty and they forgot what we sang that he's not God Almighty he's God Almighty he's a holy God.

They said well this is the way I am God will accept me just as I am I don't have to change he'll affirm me and accept me on his own terms that's what they said we'll just look at the ark we'll just do it our way.

But God didn't just affirm their well-meant actions. God said to them you should have taken my word seriously you should have obeyed me.

It's a pretty tough lesson wasn't it that they learned the people of Beth Shemesh. Maybe you're sitting and thinking well thank goodness that we do not live in the world of the Old Testament thank goodness that we're New Testament Christians we don't live in that age of fear and trembling.

Well I'm afraid if that's what you think I'm going to have to tell you to read the New Testament a little bit more carefully. You might start with Acts chapter 5 and a couple called Ananias and Sapphira what do you make of that?

[22 : 12] Struck down. What about Hebrews chapter 10 where he's writing to a New Testament church just like us sitting here and says this it's a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God?

Yes you see because it's the same God then and now and we're the same kind of sinful people then and now the same people who forget all about God's holiness just like the men of Beth Shemesh. We have the same privileges then yes we've got the Bible. We're not told in this story how the Philistines manoeuvred the ark of God but the Philistines didn't know any better but these men had the Bible they had the instructions.

They had revelation. As the Bible says all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. It's not possessing God's word that matters. We'll be judged by what we've done with it and privilege confers responsibility and friends I have to tell you that we sitting here today we have far greater privileges than these men of Beth Shemesh ever had in the knowledge of God and his holiness and the terrible consequences of disobedience we've got so much more revelation the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

We are witnesses not just to the terror of God's judgment on sin in a story like this we have seen the ultimate consequences of God's judgment on sin in the cross of Jesus Christ.

[23 : 47] and that's why the writer in the book of Hebrews chapter 12 writing to a New Testament church that's why he says that if the Old Testament people of God didn't escape judgment when God warned them on earth how much less will we if we refuse his warnings from heaven from the risen Christ.

Do we think we can be casual with the holiness of God? Do you think you can just approach God any old way you like live before him casually and carelessly any old way you like?

Well friends you can't think like that if you read the New Testament or the Old Testament. If we think like that we're just not taking the God of the Bible seriously.

Same writer to the Hebrews says let us offer to God acceptable worship acceptable service that just means the way we live before him. Let it be acceptable with reverence and awe for our God is a consuming fire.

That's just the same message as God was giving to these men of Beth Shemesh. The climax of the story is in verse 20. Do you see? Who is able to stand before the Lord this holy God?

[25 : 08] That's the right reaction to look at God, to look at the true God, the God of holiness and goodness and then to look at ourselves and see our sinfulness and our unworthiness.

That's the right reaction because the answer has got to come from God. To stand in his presence we must fall down before him, bow the knee to him, obey him, obey his word, the word he's made plain to us in the scripture, the word that tells us there is one way, only one way to approach this

God and it's the way he commands.

It's in the shelter of his covenant word, his gospel, true repentance and true faith in him as the one God made known to us now abundantly in Jesus Christ.

The men of Israel learned it the hard way as chapter 7 verse 2, the last verse that we read tells us, it was 20 years without God's blessing among them, 20 years of lamenting, of heart searching, of repentance before they learned to stop underestimating the God of the Bible, before they learned that you just can't have the blessing of the presence of God even if you have his ark in your midst without submission and obedience to his lordship.

That means obedience to his word. Chapter 7 though does go on to tell us that when it did, at last the penny dropped, when at last wholeheartedly they did confess their sin, they did serve God alone as verse 4 says, well, you can read it later on, God's blessing was abundantly upon them.

[26 : 56] And friends, nothing has changed there either, that's still the same today too, it's true in churches, it's true in the individual lives of men and women and boys and girls, may take a long time it may take hard lessons for you and for me to bring us to submission, to bring us to the point where we've realized that the true God of the Bible is a holy God, can't be trifled with.

The fear of this holy God is, as the Bible says, the beginning of wisdom. It may take us a long time, but when we do, and when we serve the Lord only, listening to his word, approaching him his way, through his Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior, then there is restoration and renewal and forgiveness and new life and a new start, a life of rejoicing.

So better listen, hadn't we, and make sure that we don't underestimate the God of the Bible, but rather we learn, the men of Beth Shemesh, the men of Israel, the men of Philistia, come to take this God seriously.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, forgive us that we so often paint you in our image, and as a result we have a fantasy God who is wholly other better than the truth.

We thank you that you've revealed your holiness and your purity to us, and most wonderfully and especially in your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you that you are a God who has in your word made clear the way to avoid your judgment, that we might be safe and recipients of your grace and mercy.

[28 : 56] Help us, we pray, never to think we know better than you, but grant us humility and repentance before you, that we might approach you through your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and his great offer of life to us, and in obedience to him, find life that is life in all its fullness, and joy even in your presence, the presence of a holy God.

So hear us, we pray for Jesus sake. Amen. Well, good to have you with us next week.