

God's Glory in Exile

1 Samuel 5:1-12

Halifax: 22 December 2024

Introduction:

Last week, in 1 Samuel 4, we saw what happens to God's people when their hearts grow cold: Ritual without Repentance.

- Instead of trusting in the living God to save them, they look to the things that are associated with Him—the ark of the covenant, baptism, having their devotions...
 - They even add things like special washings, praying to Mary, drama—you name it...
- They look to all these things without ever turning to God and repenting of their sin.

We saw what the outcome of this was.

- They are defeated.
- The LORD gives them into the hands of those who openly oppose God.
- But instead of turning back to Him in humility and repentance, they keep relying on forms.

In the account we read, they actually brought the ark of the covenant into battle with them.

- They thought that by having this OT symbol of God's presence, they would be saved.
- Instead the Philistines, whom God had raised up to chasten them that they might repent and turn to Him, not only slaughtered 30,000 troops in one day, but stole the ark and killed the wicked sons of the high priest who were with the ark.

When Eli the high priest and one of his son's wives heard the news, they both died.

- The wife went into labour and bore a son whom she named Ichabod with her dying breath, explaining that the glory of God had departed from Israel.
- She was right. God had removed His glory from Israel. The Philistines supposed that they had defeated and captured God because He let them take the ark.

We can see this today in churches that have a form without godliness and the gospel.

- Our enemies think they have defeated God Himself and expect God to help them.

I told you last week that we would look at what happened with the ark when it was taken into the hands of the Philistines.

- The narrative picks up in chapter 5 with the words, "Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it..."
- I will go ahead and read the chapter now. This is the word of God. 1 Sam 5.

1 Sam 5:1-12: Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. ² When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the temple of Dagon and set it by Dagon. ³ And when the people of Ashdod arose early in the morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the earth before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and set it in its place again. ⁴ And when they arose early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the ground before the ark of the LORD.

The head of Dagon and both the palms of its hands *were* broken off on the threshold; only Dagon's *torso* was left of it. ⁵ Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor any who come into Dagon's house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day."

⁶ But the hand of the LORD was heavy on the people of Ashdod, and He ravaged them and struck them with tumors, *both* Ashdod and its territory. ⁷ And when the men of Ashdod saw how *it was*, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not

remain with us, for His hand is harsh toward us and Dagon our god.”⁸ Therefore they sent and gathered to themselves all the lords of the Philistines, and said, “What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?” And they answered, “Let the ark of the God of Israel be carried away to Gath.” So they carried the ark of the God of Israel away.⁹ So it was, after they had carried it away, that the hand of the LORD was against the city with a very great destruction; and He struck the men of the city, both small and great, and tumors broke out on them.¹⁰ Therefore they sent

the ark of God to Ekron. So it was, as the ark of God came to Ekron, that the Ekronites cried out, saying, “They have brought the ark of the God of Israel to us, to kill us and our people!”¹¹ So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines, and said, “Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it go back to its own place, so that it does not kill us and our people.” For there was a deadly destruction throughout all the city; the hand of God was very heavy there.¹² And the men who did not die were stricken with the tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.”

Thanks be to God for His holy and infallible word.

I. Here we observe a common delusion of God’s enemies, “God is on our side. He is now in our hands and we can use Him as we want”

A. It is hard to conceive the elation of the Philistines when, as described in the first two verses, “They took the ark” and brought it into the temple of Dagon, their god.

1. The popular conception about divinity in those days was that there were many gods.
 - This had come about since the great flood as different nations had gradually embraced idolatrous notions about God to such an extent that they were no longer even worshipping the true God, but demons.
 - God had chosen Israel to be the nation in which He would preserve the knowledge of Him—which was no easy task, what with man’s sinful nature.
 - The LORD had to keep on sending prophets to speak for Him and to keep on sending things like this attack by the Philistines to straighten them out.
 - But as in our day, there were lots of different gods besides the true God, and the notion at this time was that each nation has a god and sometimes one god would defeat another god.
 - There was also the idea that there were forces that the gods were under and that they had needs that had to be met...
 - This meant that if you played things the right way, you could arrange it so that these gods would do things for you—like sending rain for your crops or giving you victory in battle.
2. The Philistines were quite pleased because they thought that by getting the ark, they now had the LORD, the true and living God, on their side!
 - This was quite wonderful because Yahweh, the true God, Israel’s God, unnerved all the nations.
 - For example, as we saw last week and as we will see again in chapter 6, the Philistines remembered how God had brought His people out of Egypt, sending the plagues on powerful Egypt and rendering them helpless—and parting the Red Sea so His people could come across.

- It had been demonstrated again and again that Israel's God was not like the other gods—that they were weak and impotent—although sometimes they would win battles against Israel when God was chastening Israel...
 - But the enemies did not necessarily know or understand that.
 - This was such a time.
- So in the Philistines' minds, they had captured Israel's God and could now put Him into their own service.
 - The narrative mentions repeatedly how they took the ark or brought the ark or set the ark in a place—the same root word is used in the original Hebrew for all this bringing and taking and setting.
 - They put Him next to Dagon, their idol, that was no doubt an idol that represented a demon they worshipped as their god.
 - Paul tells us that when the nations offer sacrifices to their gods, they offer them to demons—that is, fallen angels.
- How glad they were, after all these years, to have Israel's powerful God in their hands...as they supposed.

B. This grand delusion that we have God on our side is what many people think today.

1. The general view today is that we all have our different views about God, but that He is basically pleased with us if we are decent people...
 - And that He is there for us when we need Him.
 - We can pray when we are troubled, and we generally believe that when people die, they all go to a better place—with or without Jesus.
 - People suppose that if they have churches, ministers, priests, sacraments, images, services, holy days, Bibles, prayers, praises and all the rest, they are good.
2. These sentiments come out a lot at this time of year with Christmas.
 - There is a general conception that God is quite pleased with us all and that we should all be joyful and full of hope—whether we have ever repented and been reconciled to God through faith in Christ who was crucified or not.
 - God accepts us all and it doesn't really matter much which name we give Him—one religion or no religion is as good as another as long as we want peace and good-will toward men.
 - But lots of people in our society acknowledge the true God who sent Jesus at some level, and show up to church at Christmas and Easter.
 - As we harden our hearts more toward the true God, this is less prevalent than it used to be, but it is still quite common.

TRANS> The delusion that we have control of divinity—and often of the one true God—has been prevalent in all ages.

II. God dispels this delusion.

A. In our text, He shows the Philistines that He is not on their side.

- His ark may be in their hands because He let them take it to correct His people, but that does not mean that He is in their hands.
 - It is completely the opposite. Both they and their god are in His hands.
 - They cannot control Him. He controls them.

1. First, He shows that Dagon is powerless before Him.
 - a. On the first night, Dagon falls off his pedestal, prostrate before the ark of God.
 - There he is, in a humble, worshipping position, prostrate before the ark.
 - The Philistines find this and they immediately set him back up again.
 - b. On the second night, something even more dramatic happened.
 - Dagon's arms and head are cut off (not an easy thing to do) so that only his stump is left—the head and arms are on the threshold.
 - It was common in those days for conquering kings to take the head and sometimes the hands of their defeated foes as trophies.
 - There are records that some of the gods demanded these as offerings.
 - In later years, sometimes they wanted beating hearts or breathing lungs to be cut out as an offering.
2. Second, the LORD shows them that He is displeased with them.
 - a. The text says that **“His hand was heavy upon them.”**
 - There is a lot of hands here—Dagon's were cut off—God was certainly not in Dagon's hands...
 - The people thought since the ark was in their hands, they could use God, but instead His hand is heavy upon them...
 - b. Note also that the word *heavy* in the ordinal Hebrew is related to the word *glory*.
 - God's glory had indeed been exiled from Israel as was already mentioned, but now His glory is being revealed at Philistia!
 - c. His power is being revealed in a terrible plague.
 - Verse 6 says that He ravaged not only the people in the city of Ashdod, but also in the surrounding area with tumours.
 - Imagine the horror of everyone having tumours suddenly growing on them.
 - They conclude that the ark must not remain at Ashdod. They had a coalition of five kings or lords, each over a city, so they get together and decide to take the ark (here they go again—taking it) to Gath.
 - Verse 9 tells us that they also, people of all ages and stations of life, broke out with tumours at Gath.
 - They take it to the border town—Ekron—closer to Israel, and the same thing happens so that people there insist that the ark must be sent back to Israel at once...
 - We are told that there was a deadly destruction throughout all the city—that at Ekron, God's hand was very heavy...
 - Verse 12 says that all the men who did not die were stricken with tumours. Soon everyone will die if they don't act quickly.
3. Now they wanted nothing more than to rid themselves of all that was associated with the true God.

TRANS> The LORD made it very clear that He was not on the Philistines' side merely because they had the ark.

- Indeed, His hand was against them.

B. God dispels the delusion with us too.

1. In the later part of the 19th century, there was the widespread view that we were on the brink of a golden age of universal peace and prosperity.
 - The thought was that God was on our side, even though we rejected His call to true repentance and faith in Jesus as the only Lord and Saviour of sinners.
 - We still had church and we still even spoke about Jesus and called our advances the coming of His kingdom, but we did not confess our need of His salvation.
 - We were going to eradicate poverty and war because, we declared, we are basically good and wise.
 - We thought God was on our side even though we did not repent of our sins.
2. Soon there were two world wars (the first one happened and it was said that it would be end of all wars—Dagon was set back up), but then World War II came...
 - And there was the stock market crash and things like runaway inflation or other such things—poverty continued.
 - We were shown that we could not use God to get what we want. We could not have Him on our terms, denying Him as creator, or denying certain moral teachings in His word or that Jesus is the only way of salvation.

C. Like the Philistines, it was not long until many wanted to get rid of the true God.

1. Our way has been the sexual revolution with feminism and abortion and all that goes with it.
 - Before there had been individual rebellion, but now it was openly accepted and even looked at as a virtue.
 - Churches like the Roman Catholic Church that never reformed had continued to do their own thing in worship (like Israel had been doing) and to pervert God's ordinances...
 - But now many of the protestant churches who had returned to God's word were openly forsaking God and His ways.
2. Many people have turned even more hostile to the true God and the things of God.
 - They deny Him and condemn those who espouse His ways, persecuting them and calling them evil.
 - Most despised of all is the true gospel which teaches that we are all sinners and that if we do not repent and trust in Jesus who was crucified, we will perish in hell forever.
 - The message was rejected when we claimed to have control of God on our terms... but for a while, many in our society still claimed to have God.
 - Now, although there is that prevailing notion that whatever is divine is on our side most of the time—that death brings us better things—even that is increasingly being cast off.

TRANS> But I show a better way.

III. Instead of trying to control God, it is much better to submit to His control.

- A. We were created and constituted to live in dependence on Him and in submission to Him.
1. There is an excellent eternal sweetness and peace—simply a rightness—in living as we were designed.
 2. We are always twisted and off when we don't, and we will be forever cast away under His wrath and judgment if we do not repent.
 - As we have seen, trying to control God is utterly futile.
- B. And let me tell you, when you come to Him to live in harmony with Him as your God—on His terms...
- You will find Him to be a most gracious, most kind, most helpful and merciful God—excellent beyond all measure!
 - The more you go on with Him, the more you will see how powerful and wise and good He truly is.
 - You will see how He shapes everything in your life in order to increase your love and devotion to Him, to develop your character and shape your knowledge of Him.
 - Did Jesus not promise that He would give His Spirit to us to reveal Him and to help us in our walk with Him since we cannot do it on our own?
 - Did He not promise that He and the Father will come and abide with us and that they will manifest their love to us?
 - Did He not also promise that He would work all things together for our good so that we can become like Him? That He has actually predestined those who are called according to His purpose to be conformed to His image?
 - Is it not the case that He shows us more and more of His glory, not only as redemptive history unfolds, but also in our personal communion with Him?
 - Come to Him on His terms and you will join in that often repeated exclamation, “Who is like the LORD?”
 - You will conclude that there is no one that can compare.
- C. And what are His terms?
1. They are very simply stated in His own words (Isa 45:22), “**Look to Me, and be saved, All you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.**”
 - You do not have to have some kind of special ability or special character.
 - You do not have to have some kind of special record or achievement.
 - He has declared that we are all condemned because of our sin—that is why the call is a call to look to Him to be saved. We are sinners who need to be saved.
 - We are entirely incapable of saving ourselves.
 2. And what does it mean to look to Him? How do you do that?
 - You simply believe in Him—that is, you trust in Him, rely on Him.
 - You ask Him to forgive you and to transform you.
 - When Jesus came, He showed us that He was offered up on the cross to take away our sins.
 - He committed no sin, but He was punished for our sins.

- And Jesus told us that if we believe in Him as the one the Father sent to save us, we will be given everlasting life—that is, we will be brought into a relationship where we live in harmony with God as our God—under His control—forever and ever.
3. Now, instead of trying to manipulate Him, we will be, by His grace and help, enabled to devote our lives to Him as our God forever.
- We will be in His gracious hands instead of trying to force Him to be in our hands.
 - He is God. That is the way it is supposed to be.
 - As I already stated, we will find great delight with Him when this is the case.