

# Wonderful in Holiness

1 Samuel 6:1 – 7:1

*Halifax: 29 December 2024*

## **Introduction:**

As we move on through Samuel, today we come to chapter 6.

- In this chapter, we have before us a very disturbing message that the whole church needs to hear—especially today.
  - The prevailing sentiment in the church in North America is that God is casual and easygoing. He has no standards to which He would hold anyone—no holy character that we should fear.
  - We are, almost without exception, not worshipping God, but a graven image.
- We will look at three things pertaining to this passage.
  - First, how the Philistines were forced to treat God as holy.
  - Second, how the men of Beth Shemesh were taught that they must treat God as holy.
  - Third, at what it looks like for us to regard God as holy.

Let me remind you of the background of this chapter.

- In chapter 4, we saw how Israel was defeated in battle against the Philistines.
  - God had told them that He would use the Philistines and other nations to punish them when they drifted away from Him—and they had drifted far away.
    - Their worship and their moral conduct were not conformed to God. They did not regard Him as holy.
  - In the battle, after they lost 4000 men on the battlefield the first day, they decided to take the ark of the LORD into battle with them—the ark was a sacred piece of furniture in the tabernacle that represented God’s presence with His people.
    - This was very wrong of them. They were not even supposed to look at the ark. It was supposed to be hidden behind a curtain in the Holy of Holies where only the priest could enter in a cloud of incense once per year to make atonement, and that only after he was heavily consecrated by washings and sacrifices.
    - On the second day of the battle, when they committed this sacrilege of trying to use the ark of God as a rabbit’s foot or a good luck charm, God delivered 30,000 of their men to death in the battle and allowed the Philistines not only to kill the wicked priests who tended the ark, but also to take the ark itself off with them!
- Last week in chapter 5, we saw what happened when the Philistines brought the ark of God into their temple and set it next to Dagon their god at Ashdod.
  - They hoped to have the aid of both of these gods now.
  - But the next day when they entered the temple, they found Dagon fallen on his face before the ark. They stood him up again.
    - The following morning there he was again, only this time his head and arms were cut off. In these days, kings often cut off the hands of the kings they had defeated in battle.
  - And that was not all. The Philistines who lived in the city of Ashdod were afflicted with tumours such that many of them died.
    - They took the ark over to another city—Gath—and the same thing happened.
    - They went to Ekron with the ark, with the very same result.

- Chapter 6, the one we are looking at today, opens at this point. I will read it to you now. 1 Samuel 6:1 – 7:1. This is the word of God.

1 Sam 6:1 – 7:1: Now the ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months. <sup>2</sup> And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners, saying, “What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us how we should send it to its place.” <sup>3</sup> So they said, “If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty; but by all means return *it* to Him *with* a trespass offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why His hand is not removed from you.” <sup>4</sup> Then they said, “What *is* the trespass offering which we shall return to Him?” They answered, “Five golden tumors and five golden rats, *according to* the number of the lords of the Philistines. For the same plague *was* on all of you and on your lords. <sup>5</sup> Therefore you shall make images of your tumors and images of your rats that ravage the land, and you shall give glory to the God of Israel; perhaps He will lighten His hand from you, from your gods, and from your land. <sup>6</sup> Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? When He did mighty things among them, did they not let the people go, that they might depart? <sup>7</sup> Now therefore, make a new cart, take two milk cows which have never been yoked, and hitch the cows to the cart; and take their calves home, away from them. <sup>8</sup> Then take the ark of the LORD and set it on the cart; and put the articles of gold which you are returning to Him *as* a trespass offering in a chest by its side. Then send it away, and let it go. <sup>9</sup> And watch: if it goes up the road to its own territory, to Beth Shemesh, *then* He has done us this great evil. But if not, then we shall know that *it is* not His hand *that* struck us—it happened to us by chance.”

<sup>10</sup> Then the men did so; they took two milk cows and hitched them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home. <sup>11</sup> And they set the ark of the LORD on the cart, and the chest with the gold rats and the images of their tumors. <sup>12</sup> Then the cows headed straight for the road to Beth Shemesh, *and*

went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right hand or the left. And the lords of the Philistines went after them to the border of Beth Shemesh. <sup>13</sup> Now *the people of* Beth Shemesh *were* reaping their wheat harvest in the valley; and they lifted their eyes and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see *it*. <sup>14</sup> Then the cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and stood there; a large stone *was* there. So they split the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. <sup>15</sup> The Levites took down the ark of the LORD and the chest that *was* with it, in which *were* the articles of gold, and put *them* on the large stone. Then the men of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices the same day to the LORD. <sup>16</sup> So when the five lords of the Philistines had seen *it*, they returned to Ekron the same day. <sup>17</sup> These *are* the golden tumors which the Philistines returned *as* a trespass offering to the LORD: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron; <sup>18</sup> and the golden rats, *according to* the number of all the cities of the Philistines *belonging to* the five lords, *both* fortified cities and country villages, even as far as the large *stone of* Abel on which they set the ark of the LORD, *which stone remains* to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh.

<sup>19</sup> Then He struck the men of Beth Shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. He struck fifty thousand and seventy men of the people, and the people lamented because the LORD had struck the people with a great slaughter. <sup>20</sup> And the men of Beth Shemesh said, “Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? And to whom shall it go up from us?” <sup>21</sup> So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjath Jearim, saying, “The Philistines have brought back the ark of the LORD; come down *and* take it up with you.” <sup>7:1</sup> Then the men of Kirjath Jearim came and took the ark of the LORD, and brought it into the house of Abinadab on the hill, and

**consecrated Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the LORD.**

May the Lord add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word.

**I. See how the Philistines are forced to treat God as holy.**

- A. We see them, after all that had happened, most eager to get rid of the ark.
1. Ever since they had taken it, God's hand had been very heavy upon them.
    - He showed them that He was not at all like the gods of the nations which are not gods, but mere creatures that can be manipulated.
    - The Philistines realised that they would be destroyed if they cannot get relief.
  2. We see them finally consulting with their priests after seven months to ask them how to appropriately get rid of the ark.
    - The priests seem annoyed with them for waiting so long to inquire—
      - They compare their stubbornness to that of the Egyptians three centuries before. See verse 6: **“Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? When He did mighty things among them, did they not let the people go, that they might depart?”**
  3. It would have been a huge slam to their national pride to return the ark to Israel.
    - a. By doing so, they would be admitting that they had been defeated by the God of the nation that they had defeated in war.
      - This would have been extremely distasteful to them.
      - But there is nothing they can do. God is not letting up on them.
    - b. The priests instruct them to approach God with penitence, presenting a trespass offering, to confess their guilt and atone for taking the ark of the LORD.
      - They come up with a zany approach that was according to a common custom among idol worshippers of making an image of what that which was associated with the judgment...
        - For example, if a ship was lost, the survivors might offer an image of their ship, or slaves that were set free would offer chains and shackles.
      - They recommend that golden images of the tumours that God had afflicted them with be sent with the ark to plead for mercy in taking them away.
        - The language can be understood either that they also told them offer images of rats or mice, or that the tumours were to be represented by images of rats.
        - There are all kinds of theories—that maybe they had the bubonic plague which is spread by rats, or that since vs 1 says that ark was in the country for seven months (as opposed to the cities) that when they moved it their crops were destroyed by an infestation of field mice... it really doesn't matter what it was—it was an effort to appease God for judging them.
    - c. The plan of the priests and diviners was also a clever one.
      - The Philistines were pretty sure that God had sent this plague.
      - It was pretty obvious because wherever they took the ark, that place was afflicted.

- Their priests and diviners were probably more certain.
  - But in order to make it certain that this was so to those who were in denial, they appoint that the ark be put on a cart (not a proper way to transport it, but it wasn't proper for them to have it in the first place) and hitch up two milk cows to see which way they would take it.
  - To make it more certain, the nursing calves of these cows were to be taken back to the farm—their mothers would naturally go to their calves.
    - If instead they took the ark to Israel, the nearest town being about 15 kms away—it would clearly be the hand of Yahweh.

TRANS> So you see how the Philistines were forced to acknowledge that the LORD is holy.

B. All through history, the LORD has, on occasion, forced wicked nations and their leaders who rejected the true God to humble themselves before Him.

1. The wickedness of these nations is seen in that recognising His supremacy as the one true God, they do not seek to become His devoted worshippers.

- All they want to do is get Him to depart from them... like the men at Gadara where Jesus delivered the demoniacs, and they pled with Him to depart!
  - Instead of worshipping Him, they pled with Him to depart.
- This exposes the foolish pride of all those who have been forced to acknowledge the true God, but still refuse to become His devoted disciples.
  - All who deny the true God have rejected Him because the true God is revealed to every person—to some like these Philistines much more than others...

2. This also serves as a harbinger that the day is coming when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

a. This universal bowing seems to speak first of all to God's wonderful promise that the day will come when everyone on the earth will know the Lord and be His adoring worshippers—when they shall all know Him—when the knowledge of the true God will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

- We are commanded to make disciples of all the nations, and it is our hope that by preaching the gospel, God's kingdom will come so that His will shall be done on earth as it is heaven.

b. But this reference that every knee will bow also seems to refer in a secondary way to the day of judgment when all who have lived on earth will be raised from their graves to stand in judgment before God...

- And those who died in their sin without salvation as most do today will be forced to acknowledge the true God and His Son Jesus Christ and to bow before Him and to confess that He is LORD.
- They will be cast into the Lake of Fire with Satan and the fallen angels, but they will be forced to confess the true God, just as these Philistines were.

c. Let the nations humble themselves and bow before Him now!

- They will gain nothing and lose everything if they continue to refuse.
- They will eventually be forced to bow one way or the other.
  - Why not as those who have been reconciled rather than as those who hardened their hearts?

TRANS> But as we move in in the text, the message gets closer to home as it addresses the church in the Old Testament—which then was confined primarily to the nation of Israel.

## II. See how the men of Beth Shemesh were taught that they must treat God as holy.

A. In His great mercy, God has returned the ark to Israel, His people.

1. It was indeed the symbol of God’s presence with His church at that time.
  - *God with His people*—that is what distinguishes those who know God.
  - We have God as our God and we are His people.
  - We, though sinners, are reconciled to God by His mercy and grace.
2. Just think, God Himself had brought the ark back to Israel.
  - No robber had to be hired to fetch it, no negotiations or bribes had to be used, no soldiers had to be employed... God did it in mercy to His people.
  - He Himself brought back the symbol of His presence.

B. It is a lovely time for men of Beth Shemesh!

1. It was already a time of rejoicing because they were gathering in the wheat harvest—it was May or June—always a time of celebration and thanksgiving.
  - It must have quite the scene—these men in their fields labouring, and they look up to see these finely dressed high ranking officials of the Philistines following this cart drawn by milk cows with the ark and these golden rodents on it.
  - What a remarkable thing that the cows walk up to a place beside a flat rock and just stop there after their 15 km walk.
    - The LORD made it clear to both the Philistines and the men of Beth Shemesh that He was bringing the ark home.
2. Rightly, the men of Beth Shemesh rejoiced greatly.
  - Rightly, they had the Levites take the ark off the cart.
  - Rightly, they offer sacrifices to God at the rock, for He had shown mercy to them and brought back the symbol of His presence to that very spot.
    - It was a wonderful day, and they were rejoicing before the LORD.

TRANS> But then something extremely disturbing occurs.

C. God strikes 70 of the men of Beth Shemesh down—

1. And we are told why: it was for looking at—gazing at—the ark of the covenant.
  - a. Our version and many others wrongly translate it that they looked into the ark. That is not what it says.
    - According to Numbers 4, it was a violation to look *at* the ark. Translators should not exaggerate such things.

- These gazers knew that the ark was not supposed to be looked at. When it is transported, it was always covered.
  - Now it was uncovered and they should have turned their eyes away, but instead they gazed at it—the word means that they gazed upon it.
- b. A word needs to be said about the number who died.
- Our version translates 50,070, but the construction of the sentence is constructed in a way that is extraordinary according to Hebrew scholars and can legitimately be translated in other ways.
    - It is most unlikely that there was a population of 50,000 in or near Beth Shemesh.
    - It is most likely that 70 were killed and that the 50,000 refers either to five out of every thousand—they were divided in units of a thousand, so that would be 70 out of 14 groups of a thousand—or it could refer to 1/5 of a clan of 350 which would also make 70.
- That is a detail we don't have to sort out—what is striking is that God struck down at least 70 of these joyful worshipping folks for looking at the ark of the covenant.
2. God was showing His church that He must be regarded as holy!
- For too long the whole nation had been treating Him as easygoing and casual rather than as a holy God who was to be feared and reverently obeyed—as if what He told them mattered!
    - Their sacrilege had become accepted practice—even that they brought the ark onto the battlefield to start with without consulting God...
    - And that for years the priests had not been following the proper procedure with the sacrifices and had been lying with the women who served in the house of the Lord.
  - God, in His mercy, was now set on correcting His people—on teaching them that He must be regarded as holy.
    - He was beginning to do a great work of restoration in them.
3. God often uses times of worship when everyone thinks they are doing great to reveal His holiness.
- When the tabernacle had just been built and Aaron's sons had just been consecrated and were burning incense, God struck them dead for offering unauthorised fire—right when they were worshipping and rejoicing.
    - He was teaching His people that He is holy and that they must be conformed to His ways—that it was not a trivial thing to deviate from what He said!
  - Later on, we will see Uzza struck down for touching the ark when David was bringing it up to Jerusalem with great rejoicing—but did not follow the proper procedure.
  - Earlier in our service we read about the same kind of thing in the New Testament when the church was growing and serving.
    - And Ananias and Sapphira sold their land as others were doing and gave the proceeds to meet the needs of their brothers and sisters in the church.

- They were both struck dead! Not for giving a generous gift, but for lying before God and saying they were giving all of the proceeds of the sale when in fact they were holding back a portion!
- God was teaching us that though we are justified by faith, lying is never a trivial thing for us as Christians—even if we are doing a fine deed that will benefit many people.
- God is holy. We are to regard Him as holy.

### **III. How should you respond to God with this revelation of His holiness? What does it look like for us to regard God as holy today?**

A. We should not respond the way the Philistines and the men of Beth Shemesh did when they saw that He was holy!

1. Their responses were actually quite similar to each other. Did you notice that?
  - a. In both cases, they rightly said something like, “Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God?”
  - b. But in both cases, they wrongly said, something like, “How can we get Him away from us?”
    - The grammar suggests that this was their attitude in both cases, and their actions confirm it in that they send the ark away.
    - They did not want God around if He was going to be striking people dead.
2. This is the way most people respond to these revelations of our holy God.
  - They want to be far from a God like that.
  - So they find ways to avoid Him.
    - Some completely refuse to be His worshippers and just ask Him to leave them alone...
    - Some join with others to worship Him with those who had added to His worship their own traditions and sentiments to make Him seem a bit softer and not as concerned with the heart before Him in truth.
  - They ignore what they do not like about Him.
    - Israel constantly gravitated to worship at the high places and adding traditions in their worship that took the edge off a bit of His holiness until God brought reformation to them again.
    - The Christian church has done exactly the same thing.

B. I declare to you on the authority of God’s holy word that you are to learn to love God just as He is revealed to us in His holy word and are not to worship Him however you want, but only as He has appointed.

- In the introduction, I made the statement that most professing Christians are worshipping a graven image—God reshaped by human art—rather than the true God as He is revealed in His word as a holy God who does not tolerate sin.
  - This becomes a very damnable heresy when it becomes a denial of the gospel itself—that the true God cannot be rightly approached by sinners without faith in Jesus who was crucified.
  - Most church in North America because that God saves anyone who is sincere whether they acknowledge Christ or not—and that He therefore accepts us on the basis of our good intentions rather than only through faith in His Son.

- The truth is, there is not a one of us that does not in some way distort God, but that does not make it a trivial thing to do so!
  - We deserve to die for it—to be cut off out of the land of the living.
  - And when we deny Christ as the only way of salvation, we will be among those to whom He will say, “Depart from Me, for I never knew you,” even though we talked about Him and used His name in our worship.

C. Here are three important ways to respond to the revelation of God as holy.

1. First, you should evaluate the way you are using God’s holy ordinances and not act as if it doesn’t matter.
  - Did God declare one day in seven holy? Then see that you treat that day as holy, not doing your own works, but setting the day apart to God.
  - Did God declare marriage and the marriage bed to be holy? Then what business do you have gazing at naked people and teeming with lust? Away with your porn!
  - Did God tell us to set apart a tenth of our increase to Him as holy? Then how is it that you keep back a portion of your tithes?
  - Did God tell you that truth is sacred? Then how is that you tell lies and do not repent?
  - Did the LORD tell you to regard His name as holy? Then how is that you let curses come out of your mouth?
    - Do you remember what God said to do to the young man who cursed in the Old Testament? He was to be killed for it!
  - Did the LORD tell you not to add or to take away from His holy worship? It matters. How we worship is not a matter of indifference.
2. Second, do not look these prohibitions the way the ungodly do—as taboo...
  - They do not see a gracious personal God who redeems sinners behind it all—a God who is teaching us how to love Him and how to live with Him.
  - His holiness is not a defect. It is His perfection.
    - We should not want a God who is not holy.
    - Our world is not holy (in harmony with the living God). That is what is wrong with it. We are transgressors.
  - Instead of wanting to avoid God because His holiness is revealed, we should rather be drawn to Him—yes, with reverence—but with loving reverence!
    - Reverence that makes you secure to have a God who will not tolerate sin in His presence.
      - Once we are brought into His eternal house, there will be no more possibility of everything going wrong because of sin getting into the mix.
      - He has revealed plainly that only what is holy can dwell with Him.
3. Third, let this revelation of His holiness lead you to rejoice in Jesus.
  - Rejoice in Him that He is holy—as God declares, “holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners.”
    - He is altogether perfect. The fairest of them all. And He is ours by faith!
  - Rejoice in Him as your Saviour.
    - God says that He is able to save to the uttermost those that come to God by Him.

- Yes, we are sinners. We do not get right with God by denying His holiness. We get right with God by trusting in Jesus who paid the penalty of our sin so that by faith in Him we are pardoned.
- And not only that—but He is also the one we look to baptise us with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the one who changes our hearts so that we will accept the truth about God and His Son and confess it and believe it.
  - So that we see our sin and we come to Him as our Saviour...
  - And then He gives us His Spirit to transform us and make us more and more holy—more and more conformed to God’s ways.
- With a Saviour like Jesus, holiness should not drive you away from the true God—but to Him.
  - There is forgiveness with God that He may be feared (rather than denied and avoided)... a holy healthy fear of one who is coming to majestic greatness with confidence, not in ourselves, but in our Saviour.
  - Isaiah 66:2: **“But on this *one* will I look:** [says the Lord] **on *him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.***