

“Arkeological Discoveries”

1 Sam. 5:1-7:1

- INTRO. - I don't do this very often, but I just have to borrow my title this morning. I just couldn't improve on this one from Dale Ralph Davis. We have 2 chapters (here in 1 Samuel) that teach us some important truths about God – and they are connected with the Ark of the Covenant.

- These “arkeological discoveries” were experienced, *not only* by the Philistines (the *enemies* of God's people), but also by the Israelites themselves. We're going to discover three primary things about God: the humor of God, the heavy hand of God, and the holiness of God. That will be our outline – and we begin with:

I. THE HUMOR OF GOD (5:1-5)

- Now, some might be surprised by this, but 5:1-5 is really a very humorous account. And although some may think it is irreverent to say that God has a sense of humor, I think that comes out in certain biblical passages – and this is one of those.

- The scene is set in a place called Ashdod, which was one of the five major cities of the Philistines. It was located about 35 miles west of Jerusalem and was the northernmost of the three Philistine coastal cities.

- In fact, it was probably what we would call the capital city of the Philistines, located about three miles from the

Mediterranean coast. This is the scene of the first arkeological discovery.

- As I'm sure you know, the Philistines had captured the Ark of the Covenant, and had taken it to Ashdod and placed it before the image of Dagon their god (in his shrine).

- Dagon was the god of vegetation (or grain) and was worshipped throughout Mesopotamia. He was the most prominent of the Philistine gods – and (of course) it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why they did this.

- Davis writes, “One needn't be perceptive to get the point: here, in the gospel according to the Philistines, was Yahweh (represented by the ark), the defeated god, brought before Dagon, the victorious god.” OR SO THEY THOUGHT!

- But before they could finish their Frosted Mini Wheats the next morning, “Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD.” That's 5:3. Oh my! That was unexpected!

- And then, with a masterstroke in the next line, the author of this book – probably with tongue in cheek, a twinkle in his eye, and acid in his ink – wrote this: “So they took Dagon and set him in his place again.”

- What?! This is your most powerful god, and you have to set him back in his place?! This is a punchline. It might

not sound like a punchline, but can you imagine a god that has to be stood back up again? What kind of god is that?! And think how a godly Israelite would have responded when he heard this – with the only possible pious response possible: laughter of the deepest kind.

- Oh, but things get worse than this! The next day, they go out and discover that ole Dagon has fallen down again – but this time he also has his head and his hands cut off! There's just a stump of him left. Davis says, “[This is] a regular Humpty Dumpty situation with no Elmer's glue.”

- No “home field advantage” here – Dagon is getting pulverized on his own turf. He's getting the very *godness* knocked out of him. It's as if the cherubim (on top of the mercy seat) have been turned loose on him, and now there is only a piece of him left. No mercy for Dagon!

- Now, I say that in a “tongue in cheek” (sort of) way, but the point here is obvious: the so-called “defeated” God is demonstrating His superiority over the so-called “victorious” god. In v. 7, even the Philistines will admit that the God of Israel was “out-godding” their god.

- Oh, but listen – this account is not given to us just to cause us to laugh. God wants His people to realize, that unlike Dagon, He doesn't need anybody to set Him back up again.

- In fact, He doesn't need any help from His people at all! He is more than able to fight the Philistines all by Himself. He doesn't need anybody to cheer Him on, or to

figure out a plan for the recovery of the Ark. He will return the Ark to Israel all by Himself.

- Yes, we find humor here, but it is “didactic humor” – it is humor that teaches us something very important about God. It teaches us of the absolute supremacy of God and His total sufficiency (in and of Himself).

- The lesson for Israel is, “Don't think you can treat God like some sort of ‘rabbit's foot’ – some sort of ‘lucky charm.’” We can't manipulate the true God for our own convenience. And we should never begin to think that God needs our assistance in any way. *He* is the One who carries *us* – *not* the other way around. That's exactly what it says in Is. 46:1-4.

- It is significant to understand, that in pagan idolatry the gods are dependent upon men. But this passage tells us that is *not* the case with the true and living God. Those false gods are dependent upon men because they are nothing – just wood and stone. But the God of the Bible is sovereign Lord of the universe. He is *not* dependent upon any man.

- So *not only* does this episode (in Ashdod) teach the Philistines an important lesson, it also teaches *us* (His people) that He is absolutely supreme – and that He is utterly independent of His people.

- Another way to say this, is to say that Yahweh is unlike Dagon (and any other false god), in that He does *not* need to be protected and sustained by His people. He's *not*

going to fall down (to begin with) but He certainly does *not* need anyone to set Him back up again.

- Oh, but there's a danger (here) for the church. We think that we are beyond this kind of pagan thinking. We think we are not as "dim-witted" as they were, so we would never fall into this way of thinking. Really?

- Then why do we sing songs that say things like, "He has no hands but our hands" and "no feet but our feet"? Why do we sing songs that imply that *we* have to rise up as men of God and bring in the day of brotherhood? That *we* are the ones who are going to end the night of wrong?

- Don't get me wrong – I'm *not* saying that we should cease serving God with all our strength, but what I am saying is that God does *not* really need us to accomplish His purposes. He chooses to use us, but He does *not* really need us.

- And again, that doesn't mean He doesn't *want* us, but our God is absolutely omnipotent, and He needs no man. We should always be careful that we are *not* putting the true and living God on the same plane as Dagon. But there's a *second* main section here, where we find a *second* archeological discovery – and that is:

II. THE HEAVY HAND OF GOD (5:6-6:16)

- As is reflected in the Lion character in the Chronicles of Narnia, this was no tame God that the Philistines had (supposedly) "conquered." The Ark had fallen into *their*

hands, but *now* they would fall into God's hands. Look with me at 5:6, "Now the hand of the LORD was heavy on the Ashdodites, and He ravaged them and smote them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territories."

- The word for "ravaged" (there) can be translated "destroyed, devastated, terrorized, or brought desolation." And note, I put the word "heavy" in front of the word "hand" in my outline because it is used in this verse.

- Interestingly, it is the same root word as the word for "glory," and it means "weighty." ILL. – I can remember, as I was growing up in the 60's and 70's, that people used to say, "That's heavy, man!" That was a code phrase for something that had a lot of significance – but that's what we see here.

- God plagued them with tumors of some kind. Scholars have debated exactly what this consisted of, and have generally taken this as either hemorrhoids or something akin to the bubonic plague.

- The mention of rats (or mice) in 6:5 has led many to conclude that this was something caused by rodents. And since rats were carriers of bubonic plague, some have reached the conclusion that this is what is being described.

- Well, whatever this was, it was bad, and look at what the Philistines said in 5:7, "When the men of Ashdod saw that it was so, they said, 'The ark of the God of Israel

must not remain with us, for His hand is severe on us and on Dagon our god.”

- Dagon had already been devastated by Yahweh, and now the Philistines were as well. What was their conclusion? “We’ve got to get rid of this thing!” So what did they do? They sent it to Gath (another Philistine city) – and guess what? – the plague and the panic went with it.

- Notice the question the lords of the Philistines were wrestling with (in v. 8), “What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?” This thing became like a hot potato. Verse 10 tells us that they decided to send it to Ekron, but the Ekron city council met them at the city limits and said, “No way! We won’t take it!”

- By this point it had become clear to the Philistines that it wasn’t because the people of Ashdod were greater sinners than those in the other Philistine cities. *That was not* why their funeral directors had been so busy. It was because the “God of Israel.”

- The presence of the Ark of God had brought disease and death in Ashdod and Gath – so the people of Ekron wanted no part of that. They clearly understood (by this point) that this was nothing less than the heavy hand of the true and living God.

- Verse 10 says, “And it happened as the ark of God came to Ekron that the Ekronites cried out, saying, ‘They have brought the ark of the God of Israel around to us, to kill

us and our people.” This was serious business and it *must* be taken care of.

- Look at vv. 11-12, “They sent therefore and gathered all the lords of the Philistines and said, ‘Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people.’ For there was a deadly confusion throughout the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. And the men who did not die were smitten with tumors and the cry of the city went up to heaven.”

- The idea behind that last sentence is, that those who did not die from the plague wished they *could*. They were in pain and agony, and their cry went up to heaven.

- Well, by the time we get to chapter 6 we find out that this was going on for 7 months. The consensus had become clear: “We’ve got to send the Ark back to the land of Israel.” But the question was, “How to do that?”

- Naturally, the lords of the Philistines didn’t know what to do, so they “called for the priests and the diviners, saying, ‘What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us how we shall send it to its place.’” (6:2) They had to turn to the clergy for the answer.

- Now, were these “priests and diviners” Philistines or Jews? It is somewhat unclear from the text. Verses 4 & 5 seem to indicate they were *not* Philistines (with the use of the pronoun “you”), but v. 9 seems to indicate they *were* Philistines (by the use of the pronoun “us”).

- Interestingly, the word for “diviners” (in 6:2) is used all throughout Scripture to refer to idolatrous or superstitious divining. Although there *are* examples of “divining” (even in Israel), this may point to these being Philistine diviners.

- Either way, they know enough to instruct the lords of the Philistines in what to do. They tell them that it is imperative to include a guilt offering as they send the Ark back. We have the priests’ complete instructions in vv. 4-9.

- Since there are five lords of the Philistines they must send five gold tumors and five gold rats. They’re to put them in a box next to the Ark on a brand new cart pulled by two cows that have never pulled a cart.

- The nursing calves of these cows are to be taken away from them and locked up at home. Verse 9 tells us how they will know what all this means: “And watch, if it [the Ark] goes up by the way of its own territory to Beth-shemesh, then He [Yahweh] has done us this great evil. But if not, then we shall know that it was not His hand that struck us; it happened to us by chance.”

- Beth-shemesh was the first Israelite town they would come to, because it was just across the border into Judah. In other words, the Ark would be going back into Jewish territory.

- In the minds of the Philistines, they are giving every opportunity for Yahweh to write His signature across

their circumstances – but they have made it as difficult as possible to do so!

- This is much like the “god contest” on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Elijah made it as clear as possible that Yahweh was the one true God, as he had them pour buckets of water on the altar before the fire fell.

- The greater the odds of something happening, the clearer it is that God is at work. And so it is here as well. Even city boys (and girls) know that nursing cows would naturally go to where their calves are. They would *not* go in the opposite direction.

- For them to go down the road to Beth-shemesh would mean that they were being guided by an invisible hand – the hand of Yahweh. This would be contrary to nature. If they did this, the Philistines would know (without doubt) that Yahweh was the one behind all this calamity.

- What happened? Drop down to v. 12, “And the cows took the straight way in the direction of Beth-shemesh; they went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right or to the left.”

- The cows did exactly the opposite of what you would expect – and this is highlighted by the fact that they were “lowing as they went.” Their “lowing” was a clear sign that they were thinking about their calves as they went the opposite directions from where they were.

- Of course, the Philistines were watching all this. God was speaking to them through cows instead of prophets. They did *not* have the entire Law of God, but they did have some revelation of His nature and supremacy. They *did* have *some* truth about the one true God – and they were responsible for how they responded to the truth they were exposed to.

- In the same way, in Romans 1 we read that even unbelievers are held accountable to God for the amount of revelation they have. In this case, Yahweh spoke to them in a way they could understand, that He Himself had destroyed their god, had smitten their land, and had stuck their bodies with tumors.

- They no longer had the luxury of believing that all this was a mere coincidence. They could no longer think that all this happened by mere chance.

- So what will they do (now) with such revelation? Should they *not* at least begin to serve (or fear) this true and living God? After all, it is (now) *obvious* that He is real and powerful. Will they begin to worship Him instead of their false god?

- Or will they go back to Ashdod and take ole Dagon to the “graven image repair shop” and get his head and hands put back on? Maybe they’ll go back and establish a research firm for the eradication of rats through pesticides. Perhaps they’ll start wearing T-shirts that read, “I survived the plague of 1070!”

- The vast majority of the Philistines probably did what most people do today – they simply sighed, “I’m glad that’s over with!” and then went on with their pagan lives.

- Davis write, “It is so easy for us sinners—Philistine or otherwise—to respond only to the pain and *not* to the truth of the situation.” In many cases, “our immediate fears are alleviated but our heads are no wiser, our hearts no softer,” and our lives are still unchanged.

- In fact, there is a warning in v. 6 *not* to be foolish like the Egyptians were. Of course, I’m sure you remember that Pharaoh (and the Egyptians) hardened their hearts and God ended up destroying their armies.

- The Philistines would pay a big price if they demonstrated the same kind of foolishness. They should have recognized that Dagon is nothing, and that there is only one true God – Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts.

- And (by the way) there is another detail to note in v. 12. Look at it again, “And the cows took the straight way in the direction of Beth-shemesh; they went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right or to the left. And the lords of the Philistines followed them to the border of Beth-shemesh.”

- Look at that! The lords of the Philistines (themselves) accompanied the Ark back to Israel. This is a striking testimony as to how problematic the Ark had been to them. Things had gotten so bad, they would *not* trust this

with someone else. They themselves would go with the Ark to the border of Judah.

- And notice what happened when the Ark arrived at Beth-shemesh. Look with me at v. 13, “Now the people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley, and they raised their eyes and saw the ark and were glad to see it. And the cart came into the field of Joshua the Beth-shemite and stood there where there was a large stone; and they split 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 with it, in which were the articles of gold, and put them on the large stone; and the men of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices that day to the LORD.”

- When the Israelites saw the Ark, they completely forgot about the wheat they were harvesting. They immediately began to rejoice that it had returned to Israel.

- And notice, the Israelites know better than to personally benefit (in any way) from this situation. They don’t take the cart and use it for their own purposes. They break it up and use it for firewood for the sacrifice.

- The very Ark of God had been on it, so it is now sacred. They can never use it for common purposes. The cows (also) were holy to the LORD. They must be offered up as burnt offerings to the LORD. In fact, by walking right up and stopping at the “large stone” it is as if they understand they are going up to the altar of sacrifice.

- And this leads us to the *third* (and final) section of this passage, and that reflects:

III. THE HOLINESS OF GOD (6:17-7:1)

- Here the story takes an interesting twist (that you might *not* expect). You would expect that God would be hard on the Philistines (after all, they are a bunch of pagans), but *now* we see where God also teaches Israel about His own holiness.

- In 6:13-7:1 we see where the destructive hand of Yahweh falls on His covenant people – especially when His people violate His holiness. The primary focus is on v. 19. Look at it with me, “And He struck down some of the men of Beth-shemesh because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. He struck down of all the people, 50,070 men, and the people mourned because the LORD had struck the people with a great slaughter.”

- Now, that is the NASB, but there are some major problems here. There are indications that the Hebrew text of v. 19 may have been altered in the process of transmission.

- I usually don’t like to get bogged down in the technical details of scholarly debates, but in *this* case I think we need to wade through this a little bit. I think it is critical for this particular passage.

- *First*, we have to ask the question, “How many people did Yahweh strike down?” The traditional Hebrew text has (as it is here in the NASB) 50,070 (or as it literally reads in the Hebrew, “seventy men, fifty thousand men”).

- What’s the problem here? Well, for one thing, the entire population of Beth-shemesh could *not* have been this large. Some Hebrew manuscripts do *not* have the 50,000 reference, but only have 70. So this may have been a copy error, and it is probably best to read this as “70 men.”

- But there’s another question here: “Exactly *why* did Yahweh strike down these men?” Davis says, “English versions that follow the Hebrew text almost uniformly render: ‘because they looked into the ark of Yahweh’...but the grammatical combination (Hebrew verb plus following preposition) means to ‘look/gaze at,’ *not* ‘look into.’”

- The Ark of God was so holy that the people of Israel were *not* allowed to gaze upon it. We know that it was always kept inside the holy of holies (in the Tabernacle/Temple) and even when it was in transit through the wilderness it was always covered.

- Even the priests could *not* go in and look at it – in fact, even the *high* priest could *not* do so. Although he would go into the holy of holies once each year to sprinkle the blood of atonement over the mercy seat, he was *not* allowed to stay very long in its presence. He had to hurry and sprinkle the blood and then exit.

- So, getting back to the men of Beth-shemesh, their offense was *not* likely that of opening up the Ark and looking to see what was inside. This was *not* like a scene out of the Raiders of the Lost Ark. No, the offense was that they stood and gazed at it.

- Either way, they were violating the holiness of God. It was apparently *not* covered properly, and this gazing at the Ark flew in the face of the regulations God had given for it.

- And we might think this is too severe a punishment for some who were innocent victims (here), but the point is that God is absolutely holy, and He will *not* allow His holiness to be violated.

- Ah, but there is a *third* question we need to ask: “What if the men of Beth-shemesh were *not* struck down for gazing at the Ark, but for *another* reason?” The Septuagint reads entirely differently from the Hebrew text. It says, “And the sons of Jeconiah did not rejoice with the men of Beth-shemesh because (or possibly when) they saw the ark of the Lord.”

- Interesting! Who are the “sons of Jeconiah?” It seems they are mentioned (here in the Septuagint text) out of the blue. What happened here? Had the translator of this text been working way too late into the night, or did he have a better manuscript?

- Davis writes, “There is something to be said for following the Septuagint at this point. First, ‘the sons of

Jeconiah did not rejoice' carries a tone of originality about it; it is not the sort of detail invented out of whole cloth. Second, the passage had regularly introduced new subjects into the account...[and] the Septuagint's 'sons of Jeconiah' would fit this pattern. Third, the nonrejoicing sons of Jeconiah would form a useful contrast to the rejoicing harvesters in verse 13."

- In other words, when the Ark arrived in Beth-shemesh there was a double response: Some rejoiced but others did *not*. Those who did *not* rejoice were struck down by God. In other words, the ones who were struck down were the ones who said (in their hearts), "Who cares about the Ark of God?"

- Now, in many ways, this would make a lot more sense. The over-all point is that God's holiness is being violated, but if this is the way the text should read, the way God's holiness is being violated is by indifference and apathy.

- Now, I'm *not* going to be dogmatic here (because it's *not* clear enough), but either way the judgment of God had to do with the fact that His holiness was violated.

- If you follow the traditional Hebrew text in v. 19, you would say that the men of Beth-shemesh were struck down for an act of sacrilege. They were treating the Ark of God with disrespect in some way.

- Of course, the Philistines didn't know how to handle the Ark, but they could *not* be held responsible for that

because they were pagans who had no instruction in this regard. But the Israelites had the Law – and in Numbers 4:1-20 they had explicit instructions on how to treat the Ark of the Covenant.

- And going back to the text of 1 Sam. 6, notice the verbal response of those in Beth-shemesh who were *not* struck dead. Look at v. 20, "And the men of Beth-shemesh said, 'Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God? And to whom shall He go up from us?'"

- They asked two questions – the first was a good question – the second, *not* so much. The first question acknowledges that there is no one who can ever stand before this holy and righteous God when He carries out His judgment.

- But the second question is caught better in the New English Bible: "To whom can we send it [this Ark] to be rid of [the Lord]?" In other words, "No one can stand before this holy God, so how can we get Him to leave us alone?"

- This (of course) was the same thing that was asked by the Gerasenes when Jesus revealed His mighty power in their midst (in Mark 5). It was so obvious to them that Jesus was God in human flesh, so they pleaded with Him to leave their region of the country.

- This is the same idea (here at Beth-shemesh). Rather than looking at their own hearts and evaluating why God is doing this – rather than learning from this and lining up

with God (and honoring Him as holy) – they simply ask, “How are we going to solve this problem? How are we going to get rid of this thing? How are we going to get God to leave us alone?”

- Of course, there is the same kind of thinking in our day and time. How many people see God as a nuisance – someone they think will make their life miserable? How many people (today) just want to forget about God and remove Him from their lives?

- Of course we would *not* expect (today) to look up and see the Ark of the Covenant coming down the road in our direction, but how often do we fail to treat the God of the Bible with the honor that is due to Him? How often do we fail to treat Him as absolutely holy?

- I mean, think about it – people talk about God as “the man upstairs” or put “God is my co-pilot” bumper stickers on their car. People have this idea of God as someone we can be chums with – someone we can just “pal around” with. We often fail to treat Him with the reverence He deserves.

- We *do* (in fact) need to have the attitude reflected in the first question of the people of Beth-shemesh. We do need to ask, “Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?” What’s the answer to that question? No one!

- But we must *not* fall into the error of their second question. We must *not* have a heart that desires for Him

to be removed from us. Rather we must have a heart that sees Him as our greatest joy and source of delight.

- Well, these are the Arkeological discoveries we find here in 1 Samuel. Here we see the absolute supremacy of Yahweh and His incredible holiness. Here we see that He is far from being a helpless god, but is more than able to accomplish all His good purposes. Here we see that He can communicate His truth through cows as well as prophets. Here we see that He is Lord of all, and that we are supremely blessed to be able to call Him our God.

- MAKE APPEAL

- PRAYER