

GOD WITH US
Part 3: A King in place of THE KING.
1st and 2nd Samuel

Message 3 – God Upholds His Own Glory
1 Samuel 5-7

Introduction

Israel was defeated by the Philistines at **Ebenezer** (4:1;5:1). Ironically, Ebenezer means “stone of help;” but Israel did *not* receive help from Yahweh at that time. Their great loss, along with the deaths of Hophni and Phinehas and the capture of the ark of the Covenant, was a low point in Israel’s history. God’s glory departed from Israel. In Philistine territory for 7 months, God’s powerful presence in and around the ark was manifested to the idol-worshipping Philistines. When they finally sent the ark back to Israel, everyone *knew* and *feared* the awesome God of Israel. At the same time, God remained *faithful to His promises*. Though He separated Himself from Israel for 7 months, He finally allowed His glorious presence to return to His chosen people.

Yahweh in Dagon’s Temple: 5:1-5

The Philistines routed Israel in war and captured the ark of the Covenant, taking it from Ebenezer to Ashdod, the center of their worship system. Then, they attempted to allow their god, Dagon, to stand in triumph over Israel’s God.

“Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon” (5:2).

The word “dag” meant “fish.” Dagon was part fish and part man. This came from an old Babylonian story about a being, part man and part fish, emerging from the sea. Here we find the earliest seeds of modern evolutionary theory, for Dagon enshrined the belief that humans and fish had somehow both evolved together from the waters of the sea. Dagon, thus, personified the forces of nature, from which it was believed all things had been birthed.



When the Philistines went to their temple the next morning, they were shocked to find that Dagon had fallen flat on his face before the ark of Yahweh. They stood Dagon up in his place again; but on the second morning, Dagon had fallen again, and this time his head and hands were cut off, lying on the steps leading up to the altar. They sensed that Yahweh was declaring supremacy over Dagon and removed the ark from the house of Dagon.

The Ark moved from city to city: 5:6-12

The hand of God was severe upon the people of Ashdod. People everywhere were breaking out with tumors. They demanded that the ark be moved to another city.

“The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is severe on us and on Dagon our god” (5:7).

The Philistine lords (v.8) decided the ark should be moved to Gath.

“After they had brought it around, the hand of the Lord was against the city with very great confusion; and He struck the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them” (5:9).

When they sent it to a 3rd city, Ekron, the inhabitants feared for their lives.

And as the ark of God came to Ekron the Ekronites cried out, saying, “They have brought the ark of the God of Israel around to us, to kill us and our people” (5:10).

Yahweh’s reputation was going before Him! Finally, after 7 months of pure havoc, they could bear God’s presence no longer.

They sent 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, so that it will not kill us and our people” (5:11).

The last line of ch.5 shows that God heard their cries for mercy and determined to bring an end to their suffering.

“And the cry of the city went up to heaven” (5:12).

While Israel failed to represent God’s glory to the nations (Exodus 19:5,6), Yahweh did not leave them without a witness. Yahweh showed the Philistines that HE, not Dagon, was the supreme Creator and Sustainer of life. He displayed His power and might, His holiness and separateness, His sovereignty over people everywhere. Finally, He showed them that He was a prayer-answering, merciful God. By the time they sent the ark back to Israel, the Philistines were honoring Yahweh with “guilt offerings” (6:3)! God often allows us to experience hardship in order to weaken our grip on our idols. Then, when we turn to Him (repentance), He hears our cries, and justice gives way to mercy.

The ark returned to Israel: 6:1-18

The Philistine lords consulted their religious leaders to determine *how* to send the ark away without incurring further judgment.

They said, “If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty; but you shall surely return to Him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed and it will be known to you why His hand is not removed from you” (6:3).

Though they were priests of Dagon, they were aware of the rules for Yahweh’s priests: *“If a person acts unfaithfully and sins unintentionally against the Lord’s holy things, then he shall bring a guilt offering to the Lord ... the priest shall make atonement for him ... and it shall be forgiven him” (Leviticus 5:15,16).*

There were 5 major cities in Philistia, and 5 lords. Thus, they decided to make 5 golden tumors and 5 golden mice to represent the plagues that Yahweh had brought upon their cities.

“So you shall make likenesses of your tumors and likenesses of your mice that ravage the land, and you shall GIVE GLORY TO THE GOD OF ISRAEL; perhaps He will ease His hand from you, your gods, and your land” (6:5).

It is interesting to note that the judgment God had brought upon Egypt, some 400 years before, was still very fresh on the minds of people in that day (v.6). They feared suffering the same fate as Egypt under plagues that *increased* as Pharaoh hardened his heart.

The priests of Dagon also advised as to the means of transport: a new cart and two young cows that had never been yoked before.

“Take the ark of the Lord and place it on the cart; and put the articles of gold which you return to Him as a guilt offering in a box by its side. Then send it away that it may go. Watch, if it goes up by the way of its own territory to Beth-shemesh, then He has done us this great evil” (6:8,9).

Just as God had supernaturally directed animals to Noah and his boat (Genesis 7:8,9), so now the young, unsupervised cows were divinely directed toward the city of Beth-shemesh in the land of Israel (6:12) The Philistine lords watched from a distance as the Levitical priests removed the ark from the cart and offered sacrifices to Yahweh. Finally, the lords returned to their cities, *knowing* that it WAS Yahweh who had visited their land in such a powerful way.

Even the Philistine priests and diviners (6:2) knew that Israel’s God deserved to be given glory. They needed to admit their guilt with sincerity, with the hope that He would show them mercy. Every human being has been made in God’s image – with a ‘God-conscience.’ If these Philistines recognized God’s holiness and mercy, how much more we who are followers of Jesus Christ? Are you at a point where you are ready to admit your sins and ask God for His mercy and forgiveness?

The ark at Beth-shemesh: 6:19-21

The inhabitants of Beth-shemesh were, at first, “*glad to see the ark*” returning to Israel (6:13). However, they were not prepared to treat the ark with the requisite reverence as prescribed in the Law of Moses. In fact, many treated the ark as if it were a sort of tourist attraction to be observed, to their own demise:

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. The men of Beth-shemesh said, “Who is able to stand before the Lord, THIS HOLY GOD?” (6:19,20).

The Israelites, like the Philistines, cried out for the ark to be moved to another city in order to escape the severe hand of a HOLY God!

All throughout the Bible, God declares that He is HOLY. He also exhorts His people to live holy lives, as we represent Him in our own behavior (1Peter 1:15,16). God's "holiness" is hard to understand. So, too, is the "wrath" of God, which is, essentially, the outbreak of His holiness against sin (un-holiness). Our best glimpse into the holiness (and wrath) of God comes through Jesus, God's perfect Son. He "became sin" for us and was, thus, the object of the Father's wrath (2Cor.5:21). On the cross, He accepted the judgment of a Holy God against sin, and became the "guilt offering" for all mankind. (For further study, see: Romans 3:22-26; Ephesians 2:1-5; Galatians 3:13,14.)

God wants us to learn about His HOLINESS and revere Him for it. We need not fear His wrath, because Jesus has absorbed that for us. When Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me," He was experiencing the wrath of God against sin. When He cried out, "It is finished," the guilt offering had been completely consumed and accepted by the Father. The wonderful cross invites us to humbly and daily say: "Thank you, Father, for your MERCY, and thank you Lord Jesus for bearing the Father's HOLY WRATH against my sin.

The ark at Kiriath-jearim: 7:1-2

"From the day that the ark remained at Kiriath-jearim, the time was long, for it was twenty years; and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord" (7:2).

For some 20 years the people lamented. Yet, the way forward was always near at hand. *"For thus the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has said, 'In repentance and rest you will be saved; in quietness and trust is your strength'" (Isaiah 30:15).*

Oh what years we waste lamenting the loss of God's closeness and favor, while "He longs to be gracious to us and waits on high to have compassion upon us" (Isaiah 30:18). If there is distance between God and me, it is not because He is unwilling to draw near; it is because I refuse to humble myself so that He can draw near. "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up in honor" (James 4:8-10).

Samuel calls Israel to repentance: 7:3-6

Having disappeared into obscurity for many years, Samuel now emerges as Israel's new leader – prophet, priest and judge. We can piece together some of these 'silent years.' We know that he was married and had two sons, whom he named Joel: "Yahweh is God" and Abiah: "Yahweh is Father" (8:2). He settled in Ramah, where he formed a 'school of prophets,' the first of its kind in Israel's history (19:18-24). He likely travelled throughout the tribes of Israel bringing God's prophetic words to the people (3:19-21). Thus, Samuel was a unifying voice for Israel all throughout the 20 years they were "*lamenting after the Lord.*"

It was likely that God's words, spoken through Samuel, caused Israel to lament after the Lord. When God's truth falls upon receptive human hearts, sincere hearers will lament over their sins and desire a restoration of fellowship with God. Jesus spoke of such hearts/hearers as "good soil" that receives the Word deeply and brings forth fruit abundantly (Mark 4:20). Is your heart tender and receptive to God's Words?

It is no surprise, then, that it was Samuel who sensed it was the time to call Israel to unite at Mizpah for a ceremony of national repentance. The nation heeded the voice of the man they had come to respect as the herald of God.

"If you want to return to the Lord with all your hearts, get rid of your foreign gods and your images of Ashtoreth. Turn your hearts to the Lord and obey him alone; then he will rescue you from the Philistines." So the Israelites got rid of their images of Baal and Ashtoreth and worshiped only the Lord (7:3,4).

The mention of "*images of Baal and Ashtoreth*" reminds us of the book of Judges where Israel repeatedly tried to mingle the worship of Canaanite idols with their worship of Yahweh, to their own demise. (Samuel was, in fact, the last of the "judges" of Israel.)

"So they gathered at Mizpah and, in a great ceremony, drew water from a well and poured it out before the Lord. They also went without food all day and confessed that they had sinned against the Lord" (7:6).

At Oak Pointe Church we have an annual day of prayer and fasting. We call it **"Ezra 8 Day"** because Ezra, like Samuel, called the nation of Israel to a day of prayer and fasting at a critical time in their history. Many times in the Old Testament narrative you will find Israel coming together for a special day of repentance and prayer, as they sought God's hand for healing, blessing, protection, favor and provision in their journey. These days are like special markers on our journey with God. On our annual Ezra 8 Day we come together to: 1) lament and confess our self-sins; 2) give humble thanks for Christ's atoning sacrifice; 3) consecrate ourselves fully to follow Him in the coming year; and 4) go away KNOWING with CONFIDENCE that we have sought Him with our whole heart . . . and that He has HEARD OUR CRIES. We invite you to make our Ezra 8 Day part of your spiritual disciplines.

God helps Israel overcome the Philistines: 7:7-14

At Mizpah, suspecting that this was a *military gathering* to prepare for war, the Philistines quickly moved to break up the gathering.

When the sons of Israel heard it, they were afraid of the Philistines. Then the sons of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not cease to cry to the Lord our God for us, that He may save us from the hand of the Philistines." Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it for a whole burnt offering to the Lord; and Samuel cried to the Lord for Israel and the Lord answered him (7:7-9).

Israel asked Samuel to PRAY. Their hearts were humbly dependent upon the Lord. Before Samuel prayed, however, he offered a lamb sacrifice, knowing that only a burnt offering would make atonement for the sins of the people (Leviticus 1:1-4). *"If I did not confess the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Psalm 66:18).* Having offered the sacrifice, he pleaded for God's help. *"And the Lord answered him!"*

"The Lord thundered with a great thunder (voice) on that day against the Philistines and confused them, so that they were routed before Israel. The men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as below Beth-car" (7:10,11).

Jesus made the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Thus, we only need to confess our sins (1John 1:9) before we can "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). Confess – be cleansed – draw near. This is the divinely prescribed pattern.

The Philistine army was swiftly routed, giving Israel a turning-point victory in their long struggle to overcome Philistine oppression. Samuel erected a stone monument in honor of God’s help in this decisive victory over the Philistines. He named the monument **EBENEZER** – “stone of help.”

It is significant that the site of this monument was the very place the Israelites had camped 20 years earlier, and suffered the devastating defeat (compare 7:12 with 4:1 and 5:1). God took His people right back to their place of failure and shame, giving them an experience of His help and victory. How fitting to name the stone “Ebenezer” – “Thus far the Lord has helped us!” (7:12).

The narrator gives us a sense for the importance of this moment in Israel’s long struggle against the Philistines:

“So the Philistines were subdued and they did not come anymore within the border of Israel. And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel” (7:13).

Ask the Lord: “Is there anything hindering the flow of Your holy love and will for me, and a new hope and future with You?” Then, be still (Psalm 46:10) and allow Him to speak to you. Give thanks for all the ways God has “thus far” been your Ezer – your “help.” Confess (admit) the sins that have kept God from partnering with you to bring about a great reversal. Oh that it might not take 20 years (as it did for Israel) to “get it!”

Samuel’s annual circuit: 7:15-17

Samuel had previously been depicted in his roles as **priest** and **prophet** in Israel. Now he is described as the last **judge** (v.15) or “deliverer” who was raised up by God to overcome the yoke of foreign oppression. As a judge, he also moved about the country rendering major decisions for the people.

“Now Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. He used to go annually on circuit to Bethel and Gilgal and Mizpah, and he judged Israel in all these places. Then his return was to Ramah, for his house was there, and there he judged Israel; and he built there an altar to the Lord” (7:15-17).

In so many ways, Samuel was the ideal leader. As a **priest**, he maintained a close walk with God and faithfully interceded for the people. The “glory of God” returned to Israel, largely because of

the quality of Samuel's walk with God. As Israel's **judge**, he handled issues uprightly, refusing to take bribes or pervert justice in any way (12:3). As a **prophet**, he remained an open channel for the ongoing revelations of God. The guidance of God returned to Israel, because Samuel was a pure enough vessel through whom God could pour the treasure of His words for His people.

We all are called to lead others, at various levels. We can learn much from Samuel as a leader. Ask God: "Am I a vessel through whom You can pour Your Word? Am I allowing anything to block the flow of Your truth to me?" As Samuel prayed: "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening" (3:10). Through His written Word and through the still small voice of His Spirit within you, God will speak to you. What IS the Holy Spirit revealing to you?

EBENEZER: Some final thoughts on this section . . .

Twenty years was a very long time for God to wait on the Israelites. But He was very active during this period of waiting. He sent Samuel throughout the land to bring His Word to bear on the hearts of His chosen ones. While they lamented, He was preparing to bring them to Mizpah, and a great reversal.

During that same 20-year period, God was waiting for the Philistines to turn to Him, after their 7-month experience of His strength and supremacy. Sadly, they did not turn to Yahweh; rather, they continued to worship Dagon. Thus, as Dagon fell before the ark, so the Philistine army fell before Yahweh's thunderous power at the battle of Mizpah. Jumping forward a few decades more, the Philistine giant Goliath taunted the God of Israel. He, too, fell before the young man David, who overcame him "*in the name of the God of the armies of Israel*" (17:45). The Philistines hardened their hearts against God.

EBEN-EZER is a bookend at the beginning (4:1;5:1) and end of this section (7:12). God is always our HELP (ezer); but often there are many years (20+) of maturing and "life" that stand between us and our stone of victory. God is NOT in a hurry to form His followers. He patiently shapes us into His glorious likeness (2Thess.3:18; Romans 8:28 **and 29**). And remember . . . He will often take you back to your defining "defeats" in order to display His *AMAZING GRACE* and *PROFOUND MERCY*. He delights in showing His glory through our reversals. When He does this for you, raise *your* Ebenezer – the stone of God's help.