

In the Hands of a Dangerous God

1 Samuel 5 & 6

"Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?"

Introduction: Growing up there was always an attraction to dangerous things that could do harm on one hand but were extremely helpful on another. Pocket knives that were used to whittle sticks also ended up drawing blood from the tips of fingers. Chain saws and pruning shears that helped beautify yards also sliced open hands and left gaping wounds. But perhaps the most sought after danger was FIRE. What a fascinating creation! Camping as a kid allowed us to learn how to start these with twigs and sap (although now we just use Duraflames). Who doesn't like throwing stud into a fire and watching it melt, including the "not supposed to throw" stuff like Styrofoam cups and plastic anything. Lighting gas stoves, burning a dried out Christmas trees, or even having a candlelight service to show the beauty and usefulness of fire. In fact, every culture has harnessed the awesome power of fire to thrive. But many of our firefighting friends will tell us with a great word of caution: **fire is dangerous, and you can make the mistake of disrespecting that power once, with dire consequences.**

God is described in Scripture as **fire**. *"For the LORD your God is a **consuming fire, a jealous God**"* (Deut. 4:24). *"The sinners in Zion are afraid; trembling has seized the godless: 'Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings?'"* (Isa 33:14). *"...let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, **for our God is a consuming fire.**"* (Heb. 12:28b-29). God is loving and kind, gives good gifts and beauty to the world, but He is **dangerous!** *"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."* (Heb. 10:31).

In one of my favorite parts of C.S. Lewis' writings in "The Chronicles of Narnia", Mr Tumnus says this about Aslan, the lion who portrays Jesus:

When confronted by the idea of Aslan, the lion, who is a picture of Jesus, *Lucy asks, "Is He safe?" "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."*

*Mr. Tumnus also says, "He's wild, you know. **Not a tame lion.**"*

Humanity is bent toward bringing God down to them, to build a God in their own image or craft Him in a way that can be manipulated or controlled. If we can convince ourselves that God is like us, we are no longer beholden to Him, nor do we have to fear Him, and thus we don't have to deal with our guilt and shame. If we cannot rid ourselves of God (i.e. through *evolutionary theory, etc*), the next best thing is simply to emasculate Him. The fact is, God has already given Himself to us in the Person of Jesus Christ, the exact imprint of His nature (Heb. 1:3), so that we can behold the Father in Him. But far too often we can view Jesus as a cuddly version of God, a soft representation who would never hurt anyone, not even a fly. But, the reality is, when Jesus returns again, He will be dressed differently. **Revelation 19** gives a description of Jesus as a Warrior, riding on a white horse, with eyes like a flame of fire and sword coming out of His mouth to strike down the nations. *"He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty"* (Rev. 19:15). This is not a tame Jesus. But He is good I tell you.

This morning we will look once again at the nature of God and how He interacts with His creation in **1 Samuel 5 & 6**, observing three distinct responses to **danger observed in Him**. The fact that God is holy is good news. The key question to answer today is this: **who can stand before the Holy God?** The answer: **Nobody...but everybody!**

Philistines: *If this God is real, get Him away from us* (5:1-6:18)

Let us review quickly where we left off last week. You'll remember that Israel as a nation was in spiritual peril. They participated in token worship, going through the motions of external practices, but their hearts were far from God. Their focus was on peace, prosperity, material, and the comfort of their families. God was there, but He was an On Demand God, One who was there to give what they WANTED, not a God to be revered and worshipped. Because of this, they were susceptible to be defeated by OUTSIDE forces like the Philistines, a nation planted on the coast of the Mediterranean, on the western side of the Promised Land, who were both a burr in the saddle and a barometer of spiritual dependency.

Israel got into a battle with the Philistines without the Lord being with them, and they lost handily, losing 4000 soldiers. Then they had the great idea to bring the **Ark of the Covenant** into battle with them, thinking that would somehow bring victory, since they had "God in a box". But this proved foolish and ignorant. Not only did 30,000 soldiers die, but Hophni and Phineas, Eli's sons and charlatan priests, died as well, creating such heartache in Eli that he fell backward and also died. Not to be outdone, but Phineas' wife gave birth to a son, died in childbirth, and named her son ***Ichabod***, recognizing that the **glory of God had departed Israel**. This was a low point for Israel as a nation, for the priesthood, and for the physical security of the people. To compound the loss, the **Ark** itself was stolen by the Philistines, which was the height of defeat. At the end of chapter 4, it **seemed as if not only the people were defeated, but God Himself had been bested by a foreign power**. But nothing could be further from the truth, since God could not be boxed up, and unleashed a **seven month victory parade throughout Philistia**.

If you've ever wondered if God has a sense of humor, simply read stories like this one in 1 Samuel and wonder no more! In fact, God not only is humorous, but there is a deep sense of irony and dark comedy going on in these chapters, which sadly delight my heart (saying negative things about me, NOT God!). To understand what is going on in this whole episode, we must look at it through the lens of *how the Philistines were trying to understand it*. The Bible rarely gives us the view or perspective of Israel's enemies, but here we are privy to actions behind the curtain. Look at **1 Samuel 6:8-9** to give us a clue on what was going on in the mind of the Philistines. After being afflicted for 7 months, they finally decided to send the Ark back to Israel. Here is what they were trying to ascertain:

*"And take the ark of the LORD and place it on the cart and put in a box at its side the figures of gold, which you are returning to Him as a guilt offering. Then send it off and let it go its way and watch. If it goes up on the way to its own land, to Beth-shemesh, **then it is He who has done us this great harm, but if not, then we shall know that it is not His hand that has struck us; it has happened to us by coincidence.**"*

This is the SAME thing every person that's ever been created is trying to figure out. We know there is a God, but is HE THE ONE making things happen, or are they simply happening by luck, chance, or coincidence. If everything happens by the hand of God, then we are by definition responsible to Him. But if things simply happen by coincidence, then He has no say over me. Everything God does, from having the sunrise and set, to allowing birth and breath, to having us laugh, sing, and dance screams that HE HAS CREATED and SUSTAINS everything, and all things are displaying His glory, the heavens literally declaring His glory (Ps. 19:1). Now, let's go back through this story and see what the Philistines were trying to do with the God of Israel.

The Pain of Victory – After securing the victory over Israel, the Philistines wanted to honor their own God named **Dagon**. Dagon was one of the main God's of Mesopotamia, and was a vegetation or grain deity. Some have postulated that he was part man and part fish, since *dag* meant fish. The Philistines would have had a house or temple dedicated to his worship, so the Ark was brought in to symbolize the God of Israel's defeat. This is where the dark humor comes into play. The next day Dagon is face down in front of the Ark, like he is bowing down to it. Thinking this could be coincidental, the people picked him up and placed him back where he was before. The next day, not only was he bowed down, but his head and hands were cut off! They were left in such a conundrum that they refused to enter Dagon's house ever again. It's ironic that humanity bows down to gods they must craft with their own hands, pick up and carry to make them move, and think that something with eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear can control outcomes (Isa. 40:19). But we continue to be willingly duped, even today, in putting our trust in things created by human hands instead of the One who created every hand.

In verse 6 we see what was really going in: ***"The hand of the LORD was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them..."*** Notice this term "the hand of God" or "his hand" is repeated 7 times in this chapter (6, 7, 9, 11, 6:3, 5, 9). What was happening was most decidedly NOT coincidence but the intentional work of the hand of God. He afflicted the people with **tumors and a mice infestation** (6:5). Some have thought this to be sores caused by a type of bubonic plague, which cannot be confirmed, but one thing is clear: the people of Ashdod, then Gath, and finally all the cities were panicked (5:9) and afflicted, and death ravaged both the people and the land. For seven months, "victory" was turned into misery. God was making it abundantly clear to the people that HE, and HE alone was powerful, the Only God. He does the same thing today, continuing to show Himself to humanity in the spectacular and the mundane, but people would rather trust in things like a dollar bill or title or house instead of recognizing the God of this universe and His power over all things.

The Sting of the Realization of Weakness – Finally, they reached a breaking point. *"The hand of God was very heavy there. The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven"* (5:12). Here is where the Philistines, like all people, did some things that were good, and some that were foolish. **The good:** 1) They knew they should send it away with a *guilt offering* (6:3), meaning they understood they offended the God of Israel. 2) They knew the **glory of God** was at stake (6:5); 3) they tried to learn from the example of the Egyptians and Pharaoh, who hardened their hearts against God and faced the consequences of death. It is clear that God's fame had traveled and was known throughout the land, and the Philistines were well aware of the power of Israel's God.

The bad: 1) They attempted a guilt offering based on their own understanding and standards, rather than what God actually required. Notice that they crafted 5 golden images of tumors (whoever the craftsman of those gets extra credit) and mice to send back with the Ark, since these were the source of their pain. This seemed logical, but fell short. 2) They STILL hedged their bets. They loaded the Ark on a new cart and hooked it to two mama cows who had recently given birth to their calves. Now, I am no farmer although I am the son of a dairyman (at least my dad grew up on a dairy farm), so I know very little of cows, but I DO know that mama cows will go TOWARD their young, not away. This was the last test that the Philistines put on God. The most logical, natural, and consistent thing would be these cows would start down a road and turn around to be with their young, but instead they went straight to the Israel town of Beth-shemesh. This was not only the bad move, but the **foolish one**.

The Ridding of God – There was certainly a feeling of relief for the people of Philistia as they saw the cart with the problematic Ark leave their nation and area. They could begin to pick up the pieces, bury their dead, and replant their ravaged fields. And herein lies their foolishness. They came face to face with the living God, seeing His power, coming under His judgment, and instead of crying out for mercy

and running to Israel to say “**what must we do to be at peace with God**”, they tried to go back to business as normal. This is the same response to God today. We see the providential hand of God each day, but ACT like there is no God. When unbelievers receive good and undeserved gifts (promotions, births, financial boon, etc.), they do not give praise to God, and when they feel the weight and consequence of sin, at best they will blame God instead of yielding to Him. Again, there is a reason that the world in rebellion tries to rid themselves of God completely, by education or rebellion, because they do not want to yield to Him but want to maintain their own semblance of control.

Israel: This God IS real, and get Him away from us (6:13-20)

Seven months after the devastating defeat, the people of Beth-shemesh were in the midst of the wheat harvest, sometime between May and June. As they look up, they see the Ark returning over the hill, pulled by two cows. Their response was both immediate and proper: they **rejoiced** at the fact that the symbol of worship was returning, and they took the cart and made a fire, sacrificing the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. They took the golden figures of tumors and mice and placed them on a great stone as a memorial to the LORD, to remember what God did in this time and place of history. In some ways, this would be an expected end of the story, as the Philistines saw this happen from far away, and satisfied with the outcome, went back to their land. But this is not where the story ends, but moves instead from rejoicing to sorrow.

Verse 19 gives the tough news: “*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.*” **What?!!?? Why?!!** Why did God treat His own people so harshly as they were rejoicing over the victory of the Lord? The answer is simple: **God only takes us on His terms, not our own, and He makes those terms abundantly clear. He never compromises His standards and His holiness will ALWAYS be upheld, with those who acknowledge Him and who refuse to.** The people of Beth-shemesh knew better, and instead of revering the Ark the way God intended, they turned into a show and tell piece, treating it as an attraction rather than with reverent awe. They knew what **Numbers 4:1-20** said:

*“When the camp is to set out, Aaron and his sons shall go in and take down the veil of the screen and cover the ark of the testimony with it. Then they shall put on it a covering of goatskin and spread on top of that a cloth all of blue, and shall put it on poles...but they must not touch the holy things **lest they die...but they shall not go in to look on the holy things, even for a moment, lest they die.**” (4:5-6, 15, 20)*

When Moses asked God, “**Please show me your glory**”, God answered Him graciously: “*I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD’. And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. **But, he said, you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.***” (Exodus 33:17-20). God allowed Moses to see His back, or a veiled glimpse of the essence of His glory, but not the full picture.

God takes His holiness seriously, even when we do not. He will not compromise His glory or holiness and ALWAYS demands payment for sin. This is ultimately good news, but for the people of Beth-shemesh, they could not handle it, even though they knew (or should have known) what was going on. Their response: “**Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?** This is the RIGHT question!!! But their next response was telling: “**And to whom shall he go up away from us.**” Or, to say it another way: get Him away from here! This is the same thing people do today when we neglect the holiness and glory of God in worship and life. We bring God to our level so we do not have to tremble in awe at His power. We send Him away by neglect, ignorance, or intentional fabrication. Just like the people of

Beth-shemesh, even believers can miss out of the blessing of worshipping the God who is a consuming fire! But, the story does not end here, and in fact, ends in a most unlikely way with the most unusual city.

Gibeon: This God IS real, and let us approach by faith (6:21-7:2)

The Ark found a home in a small town 8 miles from Jerusalem called Kiriath-Jearim at the house of Abinadab. What was significant about this place? It was a town of **Gibeon**, and the people of Gibeon were the ones who deceived Joshua decades before (Joshua 9) into making a covenant with Israel. They had convinced Joshua that they had come from a far away land instead of the cities next door. Joshua kept his agreement reluctantly, but also **cursed the inhabitants**, including Kiriath-Jearim (Josh 9:17, 23). He said they would always be servants, woodcutters, and drawers of water for the house of God. It was also in this city that some Israelites were later inhabit. The Ark came to rest here for **20 years**, leaving Israel in a stage of lament and blessing the house of Abinadab.

Here is what is fascinating about the end of the story. God revealed His awesome and terrible power to all, and it was the city that had been cursed that was the only ones to respond properly by faith. It would have taken courageous faith for Abinadab to take in the Ark into his home after hearing the stories from Philistia and the observation from Beth-shemesh. God's upholds His holiness and welcomes sinful humanity through the blood of sacrifice, which the Ark symbolized. When we come to Him this way, there is great blessing.

This is the same for us today. We see God as the consuming fire, the dangerous God in whom we cannot see His face and live. And yet, He has provided Jesus, the face of whom we WILL see (1 John 3:2), and whose glory we can behold. In the preceding verses of the passage in Hebrews that talk about God being a consuming fire, the author wrote this about our access to God:

*"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the **blood of Jesus**, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith**, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. **And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works**, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."*

Hebrews 10:19-25

*Who can stand before a holy God? **No one...and everyone.*** We stand before a holy, dangerous God based on the blood of Jesus Christ, who paid the price of upholding God's glory, down to the last drop. We know God who is in control of all things, can bring about anything, and always accomplishes His will. And notice that we do this together, reminding and encouraging each other of these truths. This is why we draw near confidently: our God is not safe, but He is good. He is the King, I tell you.