

Series Slide

In the 1980s, during the rise of the personal computer a phrase developed among tech leaders- “Killer App”

A Killer App was any computer software that was so sought after...so useful...or desirable- that people would buy the entire computer system just to have that software.

In other words, its not that consumers were impressed with the computer itself. Secretaries just wanted the word processing function. Accountants wanted the spreadsheet.

This became a marketing technique for computer and video games.

Space Invaders and Pac Man were killer apps for the Atari.
Mario/Duck Hunt was the killer app for the original Nintendo.
Sonic for the Sega Genesis.
Wii Sports for the Nintendo Wii
Spiderman for the PS5.
Zelda for the Nintendo Switch.

This might surprise you-

Steve Jobs said before the release of the iPhone- that its killer app was “making calls”. Because on other smartphones at the time, like the blackberry- it was difficult to actually make a phone call.

I remember when I was looking for my first car at 16 with my dad, back in the early 90s- All I cared about was whether it had a CD player. The CD player was the killer app. Even though its an absolutely ludicrous reason to buy a car- it simply was all I cared about.

Title Slide “Dagon’s Killer App: Why a Relational God is Better than a Useful One”- 1 Samuel 5-7

Picking up the story in the OT book of 1 Samuel- Israel has just lost the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines- because they thought it was a killer app. In other words- they were at a point where they weren’t interested in the Hebrew God “YHWH” because of who he is...rather...only because he offered them the killer app- the Ark of the Covenant that allowed to win battles when they were completely overmatched.

So- we ended chapter 4 with this...

1 Sam 4:22

“The glory has departed from Israel ... because the ark of God has been captured.”

In other words- because Israel decided to USE God- instead of knowing God relationally- his presence- his glory- left them- or at least that's the way it seemed to them when the Ark was captured.

Back to Title

Today I want to show you why its good news that God is a relational God instead of a really useful killer app- by looking at what happened to the Ark of the Covenant from the time of its capture- to its return to Israel...and then what happened 20 years later.

1 Samuel 5:1-12

After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod,

2 brought it into the temple of Dagon and placed it next to his statue. 3 When the people of Ashdod got up early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord. So they took Dagon and returned him to his place. 4 But when they got up early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen with his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord. This time, Dagon's head and both of his hands were broken off and lying on the threshold. Only Dagon's torso remained. 5 That is why, still today, the priests of Dagon and everyone who enters the temple of Dagon in Ashdod do not step on Dagon's threshold.

6 The Lord's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod. He terrified the people of Ashdod and its territory and afflicted them with tumors. 7 When the people of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, “The ark of Israel's God must not stay here with us, because his hand is strongly against us and our god Dagon.” 8 So they called all the Philistine rulers together and asked, “What should we do with the ark of Israel's God? ”

“The ark of Israel's God should be moved to Gath,” they replied. So they moved the ark of Israel's God. 9 After they had moved it, the Lord's hand was against the city of Gath, causing a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, from the youngest to the oldest, with an outbreak of tumors.

10 The people of Gath then sent the ark of God to Ekron, but when it got there, the Ekronites cried out, “They've moved the ark of Israel's God to us to kill us and our people! ”

11 The Ekronites called all the Philistine rulers together. They said, “Send the ark of Israel's God away. Let it return to its place so it won't kill us and our people! ”

For the fear of death pervaded the city; God's hand was oppressing them. 12 Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven.

So they load the Ark on cart pulled by 2 milk cows and send them in the direction of Beth-shemesh where some Israelites live.

The Ark rolls into town like Gandalf into the shire- and people are super excited- because the Ark that usually resides far away in the temple has come to their little village. Naturally- they're curious- so they take a peak inside. (This is a few thousand years before Raiders of the Lost Ark- so they didn't have the common sense we all have after seeing that Nazi's face melt.)

Anyway... Indiana Jones was not far off.

1 Samuel 6:19-21

19 God struck down the people of Beth-shemesh because they looked inside the ark of the Lord. He struck down seventy persons. The people mourned because the Lord struck them with a great slaughter. 20 The people of Beth-shemesh asked, "Who is able to stand in the presence of the Lord this holy God? To whom should the ark go from here? "

21 They sent messengers to the residents of Kiriath-jearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the ark of the Lord. Come down and get it."

So now we're playing Ark of the Covenant Hot Potato. "You take it!" No you take it! Don't be holding the Ark when the music stops!!!"

1 Samuel 7:1-14

So the people of Kiriath-jearim came for the ark of the Lord and took it to Abinadab's house on the hill. They consecrated his son Eleazar to take care of it.

Please for just a minute imagine Abinadab's reaction. The Ark has been melting peoples faces off and causing huge tumors to form all over people's bodies- and the citizens of KJ are like "Hey, doesn't Abinadab have that converted garage?"

Then Abinadab is like "uhhhhh- sure- I'll just get the boy to take care of it. ELEAZAR! ELEAZAR! You better not be in that toilet! Get out here and keep a watch on this here Ark! Easy now- it'll getcha if y'ain't careful, yahear?"

2 Time went by until twenty years had passed since the ark had been taken to Kiriath-jearim. Then the whole house of Israel longed for the Lord. 3 Samuel told them, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, get rid of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths that are among you, set your hearts on the Lord, and worship only him. Then he will rescue you from the Philistines." 4 So the Israelites removed the Baals and the Ashtoreths and only worshiped the Lord.

5 Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord on your behalf." 6 When they gathered at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out in the Lord's presence. They fasted that day, and there they confessed, "We have sinned against the Lord." And Samuel judged the Israelites at Mizpah.

7 When the Philistines heard that the Israelites had gathered at Mizpah, their rulers marched up toward Israel. When the Israelites heard about it, they were afraid because of the Philistines. 8 The Israelites said to Samuel, "Don't stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, so that he will save us from the Philistines."

9 Then Samuel took a young lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. He cried out to the Lord on behalf of Israel, and the Lord answered him. 10 Samuel was offering the burnt offering as the Philistines approached to fight against Israel. The Lord thundered loudly against the Philistines that day and threw them into such confusion that they were defeated by Israel. 11 Then the men of Israel charged out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines striking them down all the way to a place below Beth-car.

12 Afterward, Samuel took a stone and set it upright between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, explaining, "The Lord has helped us to this point." 13 So the Philistines were subdued and did not invade Israel's territory again. The Lord's hand was against the Philistines all of Samuel's life. 14 The cities from Ekron to Gath, which they had taken from Israel, were restored; Israel even rescued their surrounding territories from Philistine control. There was also peace between Israel and the Amorites.

Transition: There is more here than a weird story. In fact, I want to show you 3 very beautiful things about God that come out of this part of Israel's history.

1) Trust God because he's real & relational, not because he's useful.

I was listening to an interview this week of Rainn Wilson, who played Dwight Schrute on the tv show The Office. He's got a new book out called "Soul Boom: Why We Need a Spiritual Revolution."

In the book, there is a chapter called "Hey, Kids, Let's Build the Perfect Religion!" in which Rainn proposes a sort of Frankenstein religion that takes from all sorts of world faiths and crafts something that suits our need.

This is a view that not only is common now- it was what pagans thought in the time of Samuel. Pagan gods were killer apps. You bought the whole system of worship for a god if they would provide you with the thing that would solve your biggest fear or problem.

5:1-2

In this passage, the Philistine god is Dagon. Dagon is, among other things, the god of grain. In an agrarian society- a god of grain is incredibly useful. “So you’re telling me if I worship this god just right- I’m gonna bring in a HAUL of corn this harvest season? Sign me up!”

People at this time weren’t really asking the question- “What is right or wrong? or What is true?” to determine their god. They were asking “What works?” Paganism was incredibly pragmatic.

They weren’t looking for the true god- they were looking for function.

In fact, there was no doubt for the Philistines that they believed that the Hebrew’s God YHWH was real, but truth was not a convincer for them- they wanted a killer app.

When they put the Ark of the Covenant in the temple with Dagon, they were saying- YHWH is subservient to Dagon- because Dagon is more useful than YHWH. YHWH’s killer app was helping Israel win battles. Now- the killer app wasn’t working anymore. So YHWH is not useful. Dagon is still giving us that good harvest, though. He’s the winner.

YHWH was different from all the other pagan Gods at the time.

In his revelation of himself, he never pitched himself to the Hebrews as USEFUL. Instead- he said that he was the one TRUE God. All other gods were merely idols. And that he wasn’t interested in being USEFUL- he wanted to be RELATIONAL.

The ark was called the ark of Covenant. You could think about it as the Ark of Relationship.

Covenants were not a quid pro quo contract. They were deeply relational.

The Ark was a reminder of the covenant.

Inside the Ark was the 10 commandments.- Which was God’s revelation of himself and how to relate to him and others.

There was also, a jar of Manna- a reminder of God’s provision in the desert for Israel to not starve. That God hears and provides.

And Aaron’s Rod- a reminder that though Israel rebelled, God was faithful to deliver them from their own sin through a chosen leader and intercessor.

Everything in the Ark is a reminder of God’s relationship with people. Not his usefulness.

Back to 1)

We are at an interesting time in history- where people are asking all 3 of these things.

Is God real?

Is he relational?

Is he useful?

Here's the thing. I think there are a lot of us that want God to be real...but only useful. Because once God becomes relational...once he's personal...like any relationship- there is conflict, accountability, sacrifice required to make a relationship work.

So what's become super popular is to say "I'm spiritual, but not religious." This is the idea behind making a religion to suit you. There is no ONE God- there is no real relationship- you just figure out how to combine the best of all the varying spirituality in order to make a religion that is useful...but has no relational conflict, accountability or sacrifice involved.

It's the equivalent of pornography. Diminishing a person down to only their usefulness to you, taking the personhood from them. Agreeing to pay them, subscribe to their channel, or whatever- so you can jettison all the conflict, accountability, and sacrifice required in a real relationship- and they can just meet your needs as you feel them then quickly walk away.

But this is not the reality of God. God is a person, not a killer app.

Here's the reason that's important. What is true- will ultimately be useful. Because it corresponds with reality. What may seem useful in the moment- if it's not true- will fail you in the long run.

5:4

Did you notice that the second time Dagon fell his head and hands came off? All that was left was his torso as he functionally bowed before the Ark of the Covenant.

His usefulness- his hands. And his ability to comprehend truth- his head. Was removed. Dagon lay there in the shadow of the Ark of Relationship...bowing to the one true God.

Back to 1)

Don't ask, "Will Xianity work for me? Ask instead 'Did Jesus die and rise from the dead?'" Because if that's true- we better pay attention to what HE reveals about this personal, relational God.

If that's true, then we need to understand God as someone with whom we have a relationship- requiring accountability, sacrifice, and we need to expect that some of his

ways- will conflict with our own. Any God who just agrees with everything you already think is a god you've made in your own image.

The difference is when that conflict happens in human to human relationships- we each are bringing our own self-interested sin to the table. Compromise is often necessary.

When that conflict comes up with the relational God- He is bringing no sin, no error, to the table. Which means we are called to adjust to him.

Think out your relationship with God. He is real. He can be investigated. If you search for him, you will find him. Don't just follow him because he's useful. If you do, you'll leave him as soon as he is not useful to you anymore. Follow him because he's true.

Transition: Now I want to show you 2 ways this REAL God relates to us.

2) The real God is committed to destroying your useful gods before they destroy you.

Here's the thing about false gods like Dagon- Killer apps that we think solve our problems without a relationship.

They make big promises that require very little of us. But over time, their usefulness declines as they ask for more and more and more of us.

Take career success for example.

If you have success in your career as your god- your ultimate reality- the killer app you have to have- Your first goal might be getting a good performance review this quarter. So you work hard, and lo and behold- you are the top in your company.

So do you rest now? No. Now that same idol pulls you to do more, try harder. That success isn't enough. You need more. So you get promoted. But then you need more. That doesn't satisfy you- so you work long and hard, make a few backroom deals, so that you can trash the current management and take over. All the while- the success you keep getting doesn't satisfy you nearly as long- it doesn't feel nearly as good as it used to...and it has cost you your marriage, your family— and your integrity, as you have abandoned your role as a spouse and parent in order to put in enough time in to serve your god of success.

Insert the false God. Sex- marriage, money, fame....any god you serve...any ultimate meaning or reality you serve will punish you if you fail to achieve...and if you do get what you are after- it won't be enough- it will just require more.

Now imagine God- as your heavenly Father- watching you pursue these gods. He doesn't want you to destroy your life by making something that isn't ultimate...that isn't

him...into a position of idolatry. So he wants you to see your idols, to expose them as false- so you turn back to a relationship with him.

Listen, there is something in your life that you are saying, "This is my bottom line. Life isn't worth living if I don't have this."

Everybody has their own little cult. Their own little temple. Sure it might not be grain and harvest...but what crop are you waiting to come in. What god are you serving to get it? What sacrifices are you making, what systems of worship are you buying to get the killer app that will solve all your problems?

Think about it. What thing or event or achievement do you think "If I can have this- then I know I'm somebody. Then I know I'm worth something."

Whatever it is- God is going to seek to loosen your grip on it. He wants you to come to him as God. See him as ultimate treasure. He wants you to know and love him.

BTW- most of our idols are not inherently sinful things. Having money or success or respect of your peers doesn't have to be evil. But if it becomes your god- its evil.

Here's the late Philosopher David Foster Wallace- not a Xian, BTW, on this idea.

"In the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.... [P]retty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness."

Back to 2)

Dagon falls in that temple not only because God is protecting his name from dishonor, but because he wants to protect us from the idols that will eat us alive. He's keeping the truth in front of his people.

There is no getting close to God in a relationship without God showing you the things you really trust in for power, or wisdom or meaning.

To follow Jesus as the Way and the Truth and the Life is to say to all of those other gods- you are not my lord. Jesus is Lord. He calls the shots.

And where you won't do that, God loves you too much to not continually bring them up. To tip those idols over so you have to deal with them. Pay attention. He loves you. Those other idols will just keep asking for more from you.

Transition: See- While idols take and take and take until there's nothing left of you- God gives and gives and gives- until you become everything you ever dreamed you could be and more. And its because of his Mercy.

3) The real God is committed to mercy, because he's committed to us.

In First Samuel chapter 4- Israel didn't really want YHWH as their God- they just wanted the Killer App of the Ark. They wanted to use God to win battles. They thought as long as they had the Ark- God would be forced to have them defeat the Philistines or any other army they faced.

But they weren't committed to him. They didn't really care about a relationship with him.

So God removed himself from their midst- and they lost the battle.

Then what we read about was A LOT of death. From the Philistines to the Israelites that first received the Ark back into their camp and just sort of had a curiosity about it without remembering the God it represented- when people flippantly handled the Ark- they died.

But in Chapter 7 something changes. Israel's attitude shifts under Samuel's leadership.

7:2

First- after 20 years of the ark having been returned to Israel, and just sort of sitting untouched in Kiriath-jearim- Israel's hunger for the Lord grows. They have the ark- but something is missing. They want HIM. They want to really be his people. They want the relational God- not just the killer app.

7:3-4

So Samuel tells them- if you are returning to the LORD- notice its THEM thats returning. Israel left YHWH, not vice versa. He says if you are ready to come back- get rid of the foreign gods you have worshipped.

Because YHWH, the only real god, will not share his glory with other gods. You can't worship God and money, or God and sex, or God and marriage, or God and kids, or God and career success, or God and comfort.

He destroys idols in hopes that you don't rebuild them- but get rid of them.

Once God becomes real to you. Once you lean into a relationship- he WILL be “useful”. He says- I will defeat the Philistines for you.

See- if you come to God for a relationship of love- he will be useful. But if you come to him for his usefulness- you lose the relationship...and you lose everything else.

7:5-6

The first step of repentance, of coming back to the LORD- is confession. Is admitting- I’ve worshipped other gods.

I’ve sought other gods because they’ve been useful.

But I want a relationship. I want a real GOD. I want you, GOD.

7:8

The Israelites entreat Samuel as their priest, their mediator, they go between for GOD- to keep asking God for his mercy on their behalf.

In other words, they trust in God to save them, to win the battle, but they know they can’t approach him.

7:9

So Samuel, takes a lamb and offers it as a sacrifice to the LORD, and the LORD answers and saves Israel from the Philistines. The very thing they tried to use him for... and failed, now when they approach him for a relationship...they actually receive.

But it only comes through the sacrifice of a lamb.

Here’s the question. Why?

Why does God welcome his people back? Why does God forgive? And why does he require a sacrifice?

Well- I want to take you to a scene with Moses and YHWH in Exodus. This is after a similar instance. Israel has just worshipped a false god for that god’s killer app- its brought all kinds of heartache and death...and Moses intercedes for Israel, just like Samuel does- and Moses asks God- to see his GLORY- his weight, his beauty- his importance- the core part of who God really is. He asks for a very intimate relationship.

Now- look what God does.

Exodus 34:5-7

5 The Lord came down in a cloud, stood with him there, and proclaimed his name, “the Lord.” 6 The Lord passed in front of him and proclaimed:

The Lord — the Lord is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth, 7 maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the consequences of the fathers' iniquity on the children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation.

Instead of an image- Moses gets a voice as God passes by him.

He hears Gods name- YHWH- and the way God describes himself is in a seeming contradiction.

First- he describes himself as compassionate and gracious. Patient- all about faithful love (relationship) and truth (reality).

Then he also says- he will not leave the guilty unpunished. And that the consequences of sin echo for generations.

So which is it?

Well- the answer is- God is most of the first- Its God's preferred way of identifying himself- slow to anger, and compassionate- but also- a God that is not just- is no God at all.

But on the Ark of the Covenant- Built into the very thing with which God for all of the OT most identified himself with...is what's called a Mercy Seat. It was on the top, on the lid of the Ark- which housed all the relational reminders to Israel of who God is. That he wasn't just a god who wanted to be used, but a God that wanted to be known and trusted.

Back to 3)

The Ark- which was overlaid in Gold- and absolutely had to be respected and admired from a distance- also had this approachable place- called a seat.

And it was on the mercy seat- that the priests were told to make the annual sacrifice of a lamb on Yom Kippur- the day of atonement.

And with the sacrifice of that lamb on the mercy seat- YHWH counted their sins-forgiven. Done away with. In this way- the door was opened for intimacy, relationship. Knowing God.

The Ark was transformed from what it was for the Philistines- a symbol of fear and death- to what it became for Israel- a symbol of the Real Relational God's love and presence by his mercy.

But the mercy seat was a pointer forward to something much better.

In the NT- in the book of Hebrews- we're told that the blood of animals could never really forgive sin. It was stand in for a better lamb, that could.

Jesus is called the LAMB of God. And on a Roman symbol for fear and death- he was crucified...unjustly.

Though he committed on sin- he died as our sacrifice. In our place. for our sin.

In so doing- he transformed a symbol of death- into a symbol of intimacy and relationship. So we now look to a cross not as judgment- but as mercy.

Jesus is the way that both our sin is dealt with- and God's mercy and love is fully realized.

Jesus is the better priest- better than Samuel or Moses. The NT says that he never stops interceding for us. And we don't have to beg him to do it. He is always representing us...he is our advocate before God the Father. Pleading our case- our innocence because his blood has covered our sin.

What Jesus did on the cross did not pass God's judgment onto the 3rd and 4th generation- instead it passed God's mercy- his forgiveness, back into the past for all those that trusted in that lamb to cover their sin before the relational God- and also his blood covers the sin of generations all the way to today and beyond. The mercy from his sacrifice continues for anyone who would like Israel- lay down you idols with their killer apps- confess your sin to him- and come to Jesus for a relationship.

Listen- before you could ever commit your life to God- he committed himself to you. He gave all of himself on a cross- so that he could have all of you in a loving, committed, relationship.

God is committed to being who he is. A God abounding in steadfast love and mercy..and that means he loved you first. He committed to you first...when Jesus died on a cross and resurrected and said, "Come on, lets be together!"

1 Samuel 7:14

And I love the way this section ends. Israel's repentance and trust in YHWH is not only good for Israel- but because of the mercy given to them- its good for the surrounding cities.

You know what that is? It's overflow.

When you are in a relationship with the real God- when you experience his love and mercy and forgiveness- you give that out to others. You overflow. And it makes a difference in your family, in your church, and in your city. So- Are you ready to lay your idols down- confess your sin to God- and become the person that God knows you can be if you trust him- and start a relationship with him today?

Pray.