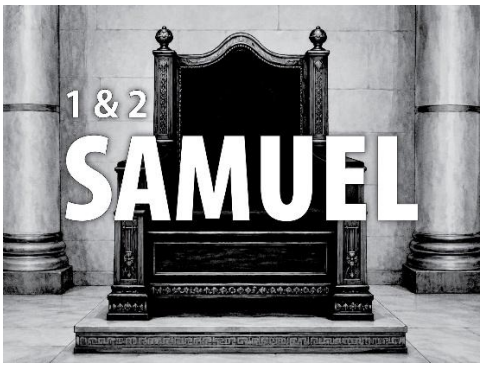


Part 8 – A Bad Day in the Temple of Dagon

1 Samuel 5:1-12
The LORD is the God of history. His sovereignty extends beyond all boundaries, even, as the Philistines learned, into their own temples. That the ark was captured did not mean that Yahweh was vanquished. All of the events involving the ark and the conflict between Israel and the Philistines were under the sway of God's providence. The picture of Dagon prostrated before the ark is both sober and a bit comical. Man's attempts to make gods for himself are as pathetic as they are sinful.

The Humiliation of Dagon
Vs. 1 – It is now the Philistines' turn to handle the ark, and their presumptuousness is just as disastrous. They transport the ark to the coastal city of Ashdod (one of the five cities of Philistia). Though at one time a city of Judah, Ashdod eventually fell into the hands of the Philistines. Due to shoreline erosion, the location of ancient Ashdod now lies several miles inland from the Mediterranean coast. However, at the time of Samuel, Ashdod was a major seaport.
Vs. 2 – Nations which were victorious in battle often credited the victory to the superiority of their gods. It was common for ancient peoples to "steal" the gods of their rivals, thus adding to their humiliation. Having taken charge of the ark, the Philistines placed it in the temple of Dagon, their chief deity. Whether they placed the ark in a position of submission to the idol of Dagon or simply placed it alongside as one more deity to worship is not clear.
Vs. 3 – On the morning of the next day, the people of Ashdod found that their idol of Dagon "had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord." This did not prompt the Philistines to repent. They likely explained it away as a natural occurrence. But the irony must not be missed. Their god had fallen before the ark. Notice how they must take their god in hand and set him back in place.
Vv. 4-5 – Since they missed the point of the first morning, on the following morning the people found their god fallen once again with the added indignity of his head and hands removed. This was highly symbolic as the head represented the god's authority and his hands represented his power. The idol's torso was lying across the threshold into the temple. The threshold of a temple was sacred in that it marked the boundary into sacred ground, thus the mention that from that day on the priests of Dagon would not step on the threshold. The humiliation of Dagon was thorough.

Panic Among the Philistines
If the Philistines expected that taking the ark of the covenant would be to their advantage, then they were sorely mistaken. Indeed, the ark became a very costly trophy. "Thinking themselves to have the ark and the situation well in hand, the Philistines soon begin to discover just how very difficult handling the symbol of the Lord's presence can be. As the episode develops, it becomes obvious that the ark has lost none of its 'weight' in traveling from Israel to Philistia."[1]
Vv. 6-7 – Following the humiliation of Dagon in Ashdod, the people experience more directly the punishing hand of God as "he terrified and afflicted them with tumors." The men of Ashdod rightly concluded that their current suffering was due to the hand of the God of Israel. The ark had to go.
Vs. 8 – In their stubborn pride, the Philistines would not yet part with the ark. Rather, they proceeded forward with a rather pathetic game of hot potato, transferring the ark from Ashdod to the city of Gath.
Vs. 9 – The citizens of Gath fared no better than the people of Ashdod. God's judgment came upon Gath, and the people were afflicted with tumors.
Vs. 10 – From Gath, the ark was then sent away to the city of Ekron, whose citizens cried out in fear, anticipating that the very same afflictions would come upon them.
Vv. 11-12 – So, the people of Ekron sent for the leaders of Philistia and pleaded that the ark be sent back to Israel. And sure enough, the people of Ekron suffered similarly as had the residents of Ashdod and Gath. Of course, it is not the ark that was responsible for any of these things. God was never contained in or constrained by the ark. The Lord will not be domesticated so that his worshippers may move him about and

[1] V. Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2020) pp. 77-78

direct his power and blessings. Several times we are told that the afflictions of the Philistines were due to "the hand of God." What a contrast to the handless body of Dagon.
Hannah had warned that those who oppose the Lord will be broken (2:10). She exulted in the Lord who reverses the fortunes of humanity, humbling the proud and lifting up the humble (2:4-8). The Lord rules over all humanity and cannot be manipulated. "If it was customary for conquerors to go on a victory tour of their newly conquered cities, it is hard to see the travels of the ark as anything less."[2]

1. Idolatry's Timeless Appeal
In the West, it is generally accepted that idols of wood and stone are mere superstition, but even among those who think least about supernatural realities, idolatry has always been a fixture. The heart is an "idol factory," wrote Calvin. That is, all mankind has a sinful impulse to worship the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:18ff). God made his image-bearers to be a worshipping people, and mankind will find a god to worship.
Idolatry, simply put, *is "any substitution of what is created for the Creator*."[3] It doesn't have to be an image in wood, stone, or metal. An idol is anything that replaces the living Creator God in the affection and loyalty of the heart. Ezekiel speaks of men, elders in Israel, who had "set up idols in their hearts" (14:3). In the New Testament, Paul speaks of people whose "god is their stomach" (Philippians 3:19). In Ephesians he writes, "For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure, or greedy person – such a man is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God" (5:5). To the Corinthian believers, Paul writes, concerning the Israelites in the wilderness: "Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters…" He wasn't speaking of their bowing to images, but rather setting their hearts on what was not God. Paul describes idolatry as worshipping the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25).
All of our idols have the same characteristics as Dagon in Ashdod. They are domesticated, subject to the worshipper's control. "They offer nothing like the threat of a God who thunders from Sinai…" People can remain at the center of their lives and loyalties, "the autonomous architects of their own futures…They need face only themselves. That is the appeal of idolatry." [4]

2. Idolatry's Powerful Deception
We know that Dagon was worshipped in Ashdod until at least the middle of the first century B.C., a thousand years after the events reported in 1 Samuel 5. Still, the people came to Dagon's sanctuary, stepping over the fouled threshold onto the very ground of Dagon's humiliation. He remained a god they could move about and place wherever they pleased. And still they worshipped. They worshipped a god who had not been able to protect his people from plague or himself from the dust before the ark of the Living God. Otherwise, intelligent people may continue to invest their intellectual resources in the worship of idols so as to be able to remain free from an obligation to bow before God. Better to trust in money, sex, success, power, politics, a relationship, a carefully curated image, a hobby, a sport, or a particular vision for one's life than to trust in and subordinate all to the Living God.

3. Idolatry's Inevitable End
The statue of Dagon facedown before the ark is an apt illustration of where idolatry eventually leads, as is the fate of the Philistines. Idolatry is stubborn disobedience against God's very first commandment that mankind must have no gods save the LORD God Almighty, the Creator of all there is and Redeemer of sinners. Whether it is the worship of Dagon, or the worship of money or physical pleasure or anything else in creation, it ends only in despair and destruction. Our idols cannot save us.

What a contrast is displayed in this account between the free and sovereign LORD and the puny gods of man. While the Philistines busy themselves moving and repairing their god, the LORD moves all of history according to his wise purpose. What a comfort this is for the church of Jesus Christ, who, in various times and places, is mocked and persecuted by those whose gods will ultimately fall down before King Jesus.

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[2] Long, 83-84
[3] Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols Fit for Destruction* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983) p. 6
[4] David Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) p. 53