

## THE LORD IS THE HOLY GOD

1 Samuel 4:1b-7:1

Key Verse: 6:20a

*... and the men of Beth Shemesh asked, "Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?"*

In this passage, we learn that Israel was defeated by the Philistines in the battle of Ebenezer. A total of 34,000 Israelites were killed and the ark of the Lord was captured. It was a wake-up call for the people of God who were doing everything as they saw fit, ignoring the word of God. God also revealed himself as the Holy God when he inflicted devastating plagues on the Philistines and killed the men of Beth Shemesh. Today's scripture teaches us that we must acknowledge our God as the mighty living God who controls the world. May we worship him in spirit and in truth!

### I. ICHABOD: THE GLORY HAS DEPARTED (4:1b-22)

Look at verse 4:1. *And Samuel's word came to all Israel. Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines...* By the time Samuel became a Bible teacher and a shepherd for Israel, the Philistines had become a formidable enemy against the Israelites. They occupied the coastal plains between the Mediterranean Sea and the western boarder of Israel, controlling the five cities of Ashdod, Ashekelon, Gaza, Ekron and Gath. Who were the Philistines? The Bible tells us that they were descendants of Noah's son Ham (Ge 10:14). They were the "sea people" who might have migrated from Greece and Crete. During the times of Judges, the Israelites did evil before God and he delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for 40 years (Jdg 13:1). When the Israelites cried out to God, he raised up Samson as the Judge to rescue them from the Philistines. Samson was a man with extraordinary strength from God, but he was weak before women. He was smitten by a Philistine woman and married her. The marriage didn't work out. Later he fell in love with another Philistine woman named Delilah. But through his close contacts with the enemy, Samson served God's purpose in punishing the Philistines. Once Samson caught 300 foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He fastened a torch to every pair and set them loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the standing grain along with vineyards and olive groves (Jdg 15:1-5). The Philistines were facing a serious food shortage that year. Samson also used a donkey's jawbone as his weapon to kill a thousand Philistines (Jdg 15:15). Then Samson gave away the secret of his strength to Delilah and was captured by the Philistines. His eyes were gouged out and he was about to be offered as a sacrifice to their god Dagon. But when Samson prayed, God gave him strength one last time. He pushed down the pillars of Dagon's temple and several thousand Philistines were killed on that day.



The Bible tells us how the Israelites continued to fight the strong enemy. They even captured the ark of God in a battle. During the reign of Saul, the first king of Israel, the Philistines tried to break his power, but his son Jonathan fought them bravely and repelled them. But they were not completely subdued (1Sa 14:52). King David defeated them after inquiring God about his war plan. He struck them down all the way from Gibeon to Gezer (2Sa 5:20-25). He took control of them (2Sa 8:1), though they regrouped after his death (1Ki 15:27; 16:15).

The Philistines adopted the religion and civilization of the Canaanites. Their chief god was Dagon, one of the gods of the Canaanites. They were immigrants who assimilated into the culture of their host country in order to survive. Perhaps this explains why the Philistines disappeared into history after the Assyrian invasion of the region around 750 B.C. and the Babylonian Captivity around 600 B.C. The Hebrews kept their identity and returned to the region later, but the Philistines did not.

On a side note, some people wonder about the connection between today's Palestine and the ancient Philistines. Palestine refers to the geographic region of today's Israel where Jews and Arabs live. The geographic term comes from Philistines but it has nothing to do with the ancient people. After the second Jewish revolt against Rome in 135 A.D., the Emperor Hadrian coined the term Palestine when he called the land of Israel the "*Provincia Palaestina*." It was out of his hatred toward the Jews who had given Rome so much trouble.

So what happened when the Israelites went out to fight them? Israel was defeated by the Philistines. About 4,000 Israelite men were killed on the battlefield. God was not with them in the battle as he had been in the past. This should have helped them to realize that there was a serious problem in their relationship with God. But how did they interpret their defeat, and what did they do? Look at verse 3. *When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, "Why did the Lord bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the Lord's covenant from Shiloh, so that it may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies."* The elders of Israel said God brought defeat upon them because they did not have the ark with them. They had become superstitious. They were like some baseball pitchers who believe they need to wear the same pair of socks or underwear to win games. The elders had become like the Canaanites who were very superstitious. They sent men to Shiloh to bring back the ark of the covenant to the battlefield. And they let the wicked sons of Eli lead the ark into the battle. *When the ark of the Lord's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook* (5).

Now what was the ark and why did the Israelites think it would help them to win the battle? Actually, the ark was a box made of wood and metal. But it contained the word of God, the 10 Commandments given to Moses (1Ki 8:9). In this passage, the ark is repeatedly called "the ark of the Lord's covenant" (3-5). It was the symbol of God and his word of promise.



However, the Israelites turned the ark into a religious relic. They thought the ark itself had supernatural powers. It was a sort of idol worship. They believed that the ark would give them victory if their priests carried it to the battle. Perhaps they remembered how the fortress of Jericho crumbled down when they marched around it behind the ark of the Lord. Of course, at that time, it was God who told them to do so. It was not the ark *per se* that gave them the victory. It was God who had given them the victory. They were mistaken.

This time the Israelites went to the battle following behind a wooden box. They had no word of God in their hearts. The word of God was rare (3:1). They did everything as they saw fit. In fact, they ignored the word of God who had told them to keep the ark in the Most Holy Place in the house of God. They were not supposed to move the ark around for their own gain according to their own ideas. They didn't even pray to God first before they went to the battle. They didn't rely on God. We must know that it is not a symbol of God such as the ark or the cross that has power. It is God who has power. It is the word of God that has power. We need a personal relationship with God if we want to experience his power. We should not make the ark of the covenant into mere a box, as the Israelites did.

How did the Philistines react when they heard the shout of the Israelites because of the arrival of the ark? They became afraid. "A god has come into the camp. We're in trouble!" they said. The Philistines leaders knew about the mighty things God had done for the Israelites in Egypt. They had a sense of awe towards "the gods" who could do such powerful things. Then they used the ark's arrival for their pep talk to rally their soldiers. They said, "Be strong! Be men, and fight!" What was the result? Verse 10 says: *So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.* The Philistines fought bravely. The Israelites passively followed the ark. They did not fight. They fled (4:17). The result was that 30,000 Israelite foot soldiers were slaughtered. The wooden box they trusted did not give them a victory. When they had no personal relationship with God, ignoring the word of God, he was not among them.

That same day, a Benjamite ran from the battle line to Shiloh to deliver the bad news. Eli, the priest, was sitting by the road side, with his heart fearing for the ark of God. It seems he knew in his heart that the news would be bad. When the messenger told what happened, the whole town sent up a cry. Eli, who was 98 years old, first heard about the death of his two sons. Then he was told about the capture of the ark. Eli fell backward off his chair. His neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man and heavy (18). The 40 years of his leadership as the high priest marked a dark period in Israel. The word of God was rare.

His daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, summarized the spiritual condition of Israel. She was pregnant and went into premature labor when she heard the news about her husband and the ark. She died after giving birth to a son. As she was dying, she named the boy Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured" (21-22). The glory of Israel is God himself (1Sa 15:29). She expressed

her despair for Israel. She knew that God allowed these things to happen. When the Israelites were not with God, God was not with them. Actually, God was always with them, but when they ignored him as if he were not, it was like he was not with them. The real crisis for a nation is not a high unemployment rate or budget deficit, but the spiritual bankruptcy of its people. When they abandon God and his word, the glory is not with them. That is a true crisis. And this is true with each person as well.

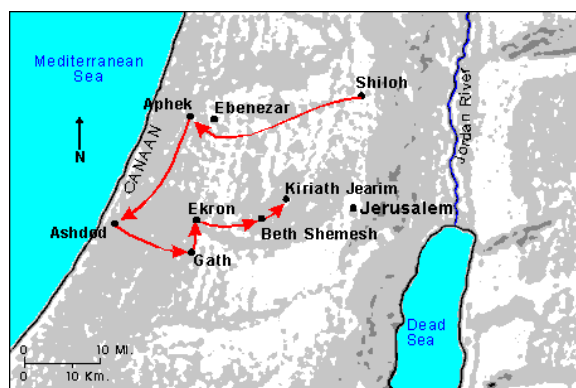
## II. THE HOLY GOD REVEALS HIMSELF (5:1-7:1)

So the ark of God was captured by the Philistines. Where did they take the ark? They took it from the battlefield (Ebenezer) to Ashdod where Dagon's temple was. They placed the ark beside their god Dagon. The Philistines, like the Canaanites, believed in many gods. The more gods they had, the more they felt secure. They tried to add one more god to their collection when they put the ark beside Dagon. But they were in for a surprise.

*When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained (3-4).* God showed the Philistines that, unlike their god Dagon, he is not a man-made object. God is alive. He broke the neck of their god. Isaiah 45:5 says: "I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God." Still, the Philistines did not submit to the Creator God. Instead of turning to the living God, they started a tradition not to step on the threshold of Dagon's temple when they entered.

But the broken neck of Dagon was just a beginning. God's hand was heavy upon the people of Ashdod and its vicinity. He brought devastation upon them and afflicted with tumors. Many people were killed. So they had the ark moved to Gath. But the same thing happened in that city. Both young and old died with an outbreak of tumors which was probably a bubonic plague (This is the same plague (the Black Death) that killed 75 million people in Europe in the 14th century).

The city was thrown into a great panic. So they sent the ark to Ekron. But the same terrible things happened there. God's hand was very heavy upon the city and it was filled with panic. The people of Ekron cried out to their rulers to send the ark away. God taught the Philistines that he is a living God. He wanted them to know that he is the Lord. Exodus 14:4 says: "And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord."

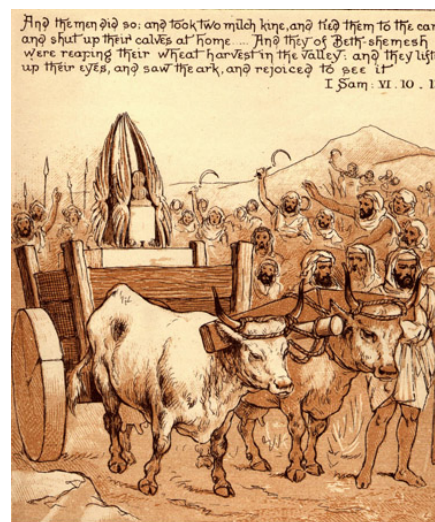


The ark of the Lord had been in the Philistine territory for 7 months when they decided to send it back to Israel. They called for their religious leaders to make a plan for a proper return of the ark. *They answered, "If you return the ark of the god of Israel, do not send it away empty, but by all means send a guilt offering to him. Then you will be healed, and you will know why his hand has not been lifted from you"* (3). These people were experts in religious rituals and protocols. They tried to appease "Israel's god" as they did with their gods. It was their own way of coming to God. People today try to come to God in their terms, not God's. The problem is that they have no real relationship with God and they have no personal faith in him. Anyway, the Philistines decided to offer five gold tumors and five gold rats (the carriers of the plague) to "pay honor to Israel's god" (5). They even drew a lesson from Pharaoh's mistake (6).

Their plan also included an element to rule out the possibility that the plague was not from the God of Israel. They put the ark and the offerings on a new cart and hitched it to two cows that had calved and never been yoked. The cows' calves were taken away from their mothers and put in a pen. If the cows went straight toward Israel, they would conclude that it was indeed the God of Israel who struck them. But if the cows didn't do that, they would say that it wasn't the Lord and everything happened by chance.

So what happened? Against their natural instinct toward their babies, *the cows went straight up toward Beth Shemesh, keeping on the road and lowing all the way; they did not turn to the right or to the left* (12). Through the cows, God showed the Philistines that lightening did not strike them three times by chance. It was God's doing. God wanted them to know that he is the living God.

When the ark of God returned, what did the people of Beth Shemesh do? They rejoiced upon seeing the ark. They sacrificed the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. The Levites took down the ark and placed them on a large rock. But God struck down 70 men of Beth Shemesh because they looked into the ark of the Lord. Why? They showed no reverence toward God. They disobeyed the word of God. Not even the Kohathites (the tribe of Moses and Aaron) who were given the charge of taking care of the ark were allowed to look into the ark. God had specifically told them not to look into the ark, not even for a moment. "Or they will die" God warned them (Nu 4:20). But these men disregarded the word of God. Why? They were curious. Perhaps they considered the ark as the Philistines did. We have to worship God in his terms, not our own.



Let us read verse 20a, our key verse: *... and the men of Beth Shemesh asked, "Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?"* The people in Beth Shemesh learned that our God is the holy God. Isaiah 6:3 tells us that the angels of God called to one another, saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." God revealed his holiness among the Philistines by inflicting the devastating



plagues among them. He also showed his holiness to the Israelites by putting to death 70 men who disobeyed his command. We must approach God “with reverence and awe” for our God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:28). People tend to ignore God just because he is invisible. But our God is the holy God. God is spirit and his worshipers must worship him in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:24). Both the Philistines and the men of Beth Shemesh made an idol of the ark of the Lord. They tried to use God for their own purpose.

Living in our pluralistic culture, it is easy for people to consider God as one of many gods. We must have an absolute attitude toward our God who is living and almighty. Last week, an article in USA Today reported that more Americans claim that they have accepted Jesus as their savior and expect to go to heaven. However, more people do not attend church except for special occasions such as weddings or funerals. In 1991, 24% of “Christians” said they had not been in church in the last 6 months. Today, it’s 37%. Religion statistics expert George Barna was quoted in the article as saying: “We are a designer society. We want everything customized to our personal needs — our clothing, our food, our education.” Now it’s our religion. He laments: “People say, ‘I believe in God. I believe the Bible is a good book. And then I believe whatever I want.’” But we learn in today’s passage that our God is the Holy God. We should not make him a religious trinket. When the men of Beth Shemesh did that, God struck them down. When the Philistines put the ark of God in their god’s temple, he broke the neck of their god and inflicted the devastating plagues on their people. God wanted to let them know that he is the Almighty God who created the heavens and the earth. We have to come and worship him as the Holy God in his terms.

*The men of Kiriath Jearim came and took up the ark of the Lord. The ark was moved to Kiriath Jearim. The ark remained there for 20 years (7:2). (Why wasn’t it moved to Shiloh? Probably because the city was destroyed by the Philistines (4:1-18; Jer 26:2-6). Shiloh is not mentioned again in the Old Testament.)*

In today’s passage, we learn that our God is the Holy God. May the Lord help us to come to him and worship him in spirit and in truth! Let us read together our key verse (6:20a): ... *and the men of Beth Shemesh asked, “Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?”*