

Who Can Stand Before God?

1 Samuel 5:1–7:2

I can't tell you how happy I am that we are working through the book of 1 Samuel this summer! I love these weird and whacky stories—of miracles and supernatural battles and the prophets of God intervening the lives of God's people on God's behalf. The stories of the Old Testament are stories of humanity; they are honest about the faith and failure of God's people, and all too often, when the layers of history and culture are peeled back, these stories are a mirror reflecting our honest faith and failures, too. *And*, preaching in the Old Testament means that I get to use *maps* more often! And that makes me very happy.

So here we are in the fifth chapter of Samuel. The ark of God has been stolen in battle, conquered by the Philistines. Israel is convinced that God's glory has left them, because, after all, it was contained in the golden box.

In the ancient worldview, the people were convinced that the gods managed all the fates of humanity. Battles were not merely between people groups but were contests between the gods. A defeat was a humiliation for not only the human army, but also the gods of the losing side. The victor would plunder the vanquished, carrying off the idols of the gods that had been brought into battle. They would put these idols in the temples of their own gods as a sign of the captured god's subordination and inferiority.¹ And this is exactly what the Philistines do to the ark of God. They carry it to the temple of their god, demonstrating definitively that their god, Dagon, had defeated the God of the Israelites.

But there's a twist. The story picks up in 1 Sam 5:3: "But when the citizens of Ashdod went to see it the next morning, Dagon had fallen with his face to the ground in front of the Ark of the Lord! (Well, that's weird!) So they took Dagon and put him in his place again." Spooky. But, you know, maybe there was an animal or a breeze or something that knocked Dagon over during the night. Prop him up again; it's no big deal.

"But the next morning the same thing happened—Dagon had fallen face down before the Ark of the Lord again. This time his head and hands had broken off and were lying in the doorway. Only the trunk of his body was left intact."² Okay, this has now crossed a line. Dagon was the head of the Philistine pantheon of gods; he was the most powerful of their gods (they were sea people, so he was usually depicted as a fish). Archeologists have found inscriptions of Dagon as the "Lord of the Brickwork," "Lord of the Firstborn," Lord of

¹ Craig S. Keener and John H. Walton, eds., *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible: Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 467.

² 1 Sam 5:4, NLT

Creation,” “Lord of the Camp,” “Lord of Habitations,” “Lord of the Valley,” “Lord of Shade and Protection,” and “Lord of the Fortress.”³

If you’ve ever wondered why God is known by so many names in Scripture, you need look no farther than the ancient religious literature—these cultures loved to ascribe as many holy attributes to their gods as possible, and YHWH is no different. Except, YHWH actually holds up to the claims of these names. Dagon, the mightiest god, the “Lord of Creation,” is brought low before the Ark of the Lord God. His hands and feet are broken off—decapitation of the defeated king was a common practice in those days, and the finding of Dagon with his hands and head broken off is a very clear message to the Philistines: they thought they had defeated the God of the Israelites, but they were wrong. *YHWH has defeated Dagon in his own house.*

And then, the plagues. “Then the Lord’s heavy hand struck the people of Ashdod and the nearby villages with a plague of tumors.”⁴ At the battle with Israel, the Philistines were terrified when the ark of God was brought into the camp. They said, “We’re doomed! Who will deliver us from the hands of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness.”⁵ They knew what God had done in Egypt, how he had sent plagues on the Egyptians because they did not acknowledge him as the God above all gods. And so, when the plague of tumours hits Ashdod (which, by the way, no one really knows what this plague is, but some speculate that it was a bubonic plague or dysentery; literally, the word means “hemorrhoids” . . . so that’s an extra tidbit I’m sure none of us wanted to think about this morning), the people immediately recognize it as an act of divine judgment from the God of Israel.

“When the people realized what was happening, they cried out, “We can’t keep the Ark of the God of Israel here any longer! He is against us! We will all be destroyed along with Dagon, our god.”⁸ So they called together the rulers of the Philistine towns and asked, “What should we do with the Ark of the God of Israel?” The rulers discussed it and replied, “Move it to the town of Gath.” So they moved the Ark of the God of Israel to Gath.”⁶

There! Problem solved! Ah, but not so fast.

“But when the Ark arrived at Gath, the Lord’s heavy hand fell on its men, young and old; he struck them with a plague of tumors, and there was a great panic. ¹⁰ So they sent the Ark of God to the town of Ekron, but when the people of Ekron saw it coming

³ Keener and Walton, *Cultural Backgrounds*, 469.

⁴ 1 Sam 5:6, NLT

⁵ 1 Sam 4:8, NIV

⁶ 1 Sam 5:7–8, NLT

they cried out, “They are bringing the Ark of the God of Israel here to kill us, too!”¹¹ The people summoned the Philistine rulers again and begged them, “Please send the Ark of the God of Israel back to its own country, or he will kill us all.” For the deadly plague from God had already begun, and great fear was sweeping across the town.¹² Those who didn’t die were afflicted with tumors; and the cry from the town rose to heaven.”⁷

After seven months of plague, the Philistines are desperate. They summon their priests and diviners and ask them, “What should we do about the Ark of the Lord? Tell us how to return it to its own country.”⁸

They are defeated; they admit it. Ironically, Israel brought the ark of the Lord into battle so that he might win it for them. When the ark is captured, they assume that the glory of God has left them and they are abandoned. Instead, *completely on God’s terms*, his glory has only moved locations—he has been among the Philistines for seven months. Just as with the Egyptians so long ago, God’s hand of judgment has been on those who seek to control him, to bend *him* to *their* will.

God will be God, regardless of how humans try to use him or manipulate him or control him for their own gains. He will not be manipulated. Instead, this foray into Philistine territory shows the enemy of Israel *exactly* who this god is—he is far greater than any of the Canaanite, Egyptian, or Philistine gods. Just as with Pharaoh, God confronts the Philistines with their preconceived notions of who he is, and he demolishes everything they thought was true about their gods.

Twice, this story says, “The hand of the Lord was heavy” on the Philistines.⁹ The Hebrew word for heavy is *kavod*, which is also the word for *glory*. So, we see that God’s glory, having left Israel, descends *heavily* on the Philistines. His hand—the ancient symbol of judgment—is stretched out against them, making his presence and glory known to the Philistines. The narrative has left Israel entirely and follows the ark, the symbol of God’s glorious presence among his people; we realize that the main character of the story is not Israel or the Philistines—*it is God*, and he makes himself known in his defeat of Dagon and in the plagues on the people.

And so, they admit their defeat. ““Send the Ark of the God of Israel back with a gift,” they were told. “Send a guilt offering so the plague will stop. Then, if you are healed, you will know it was his hand that caused the plague.”⁴ “What sort of guilt offering should we send?” they asked. And they were told, “Since the plague has struck both you and your five

⁷ 1 Sam 5:9–11, NLT

⁸ 1 Sam 6:2, NLT

⁹ 1 Sam 5:6, 11

rulers, make five gold tumors and five gold rats, just like those that have ravaged your land.⁵ Make these things to show honor to the God of Israel. Perhaps then he will stop afflicting you, your gods, and your land. ⁶ Don't be stubborn and rebellious as Pharaoh and the Egyptians were. By the time God was finished with them, they were eager to let Israel go."

The Philistine priests are wise; they urge their kings to *not* be like Pharaoh and the Egyptians ("we know how that went, boys, and we don't want to be totally destroyed like they were!"). They send the ark back with gifts of gold to appease God, and they do it as a sort of test to see if the plagues really were the hand of God.

They put the ark on a cart and hitch the cart to two cows that had just given birth. The brand new calves are separated from their mother, and then the cows are let loose to go wherever they want. Now, naturally, the cows would refuse to leave their calves. But these ones do, and the kings follow the cows all the way into Israelite territory. "If [the cows] cross the border of our land and go [into Israel], we will know it was the Lord who brought this great disaster upon us. If they don't, we will know it was not his hand that caused the plague. It came simply by chance."¹⁰ The results of their scientific experiment show that it was certainly *not* by chance. The cows head straight for Israel, and the result is that Philistines, like the Egyptians, *know that it is the Lord God* who brought the plagues upon them.

And then, the story leaves the Philistines behind. They return to their own lands after seeking the ark return to Israel. But I wonder what their response was as they returned home. We don't find out whether they worship YHWH as God, or whether they simply repair Dagon and continue as before. The plagues are removed; they have been confronted with the Lord God, the Creator of the universe and the supreme God over all gods, and yet, despite their return of the ark, we don't hear anything else from them.

It is a retelling of the plagues of Egypt: Like Egypt, the Philistines are plagued by the heavy hand of God. But unlike Egypt, they return the ark after only three rounds of plague, whereas it took ten plagues for Pharaoh to let Israel go. The Philistines do not fully repent; they acknowledge the power and presence of God, but that's as far as it goes. Based on their later skirmishes with Israel, we see that this encounter with God did not lead to a heart change in the Philistines. They insist on opposing God and Israel wherever they can.

God's glory was among them, but they did not know how to worship him. They simply wished to get rid of him. It's heartbreaking. God gave them an opportunity to encounter him, and they stopped short of the invitation. They were afraid; they pushed him away.

¹⁰ 1 Sam 6:9, NLT

There's a question hanging in this unresolved story: *When we are confronted with the God of all glory, how will we respond?* I'm not talking about some future day of judgment. I'm talking about here and now—when you have experiences where you see the presence and glory of God, are you tempted to push him away? It's easier that way, for sure. To accept God's voice speaking to you, asking you to acknowledge him as Lord and God over your life, means that your heart must change. Your habits must change. Your will must bend to *his*.

When something crazy happens, like oh, I don't know, the power goes out on a Sunday morning and *it just so happens* that it's a Sunday where we are singing only hymns and can therefore sing the closing hymns straight out of the hymnal, we can choose to admit that God's presence and glory was there among us, or we can chalk it up to coincidence. And even if you do admit that God was here with us, you have another choice: to bow in reverence, or to push him away, to say it's coincidence. The Philistines admit God's presence, but they push him away, desperate to get his glory out of their midst. There is a choice: *how will you respond when God shows up to you in your life?*

Then, suddenly, we cut back to the people of Israel. The Philistines are left behind; the narrative shifts to Israel. Or rather, the narrative follows the ark: it was in Philistine territory, and now it is among the Israelites. *God* was in Philistine territory, and now he is back in Israel. How will they react? How will *God* respond?

The people of Israel are doing the ordinary, everyday task of harvesting wheat when the cart pulling the ark rolls into view. And they are overjoyed! They immediately drop everything and sacrifice the cows as a burnt offering of thanks. It's a tremendous celebration of worship—YHWH is back, his glory is back, he has not abandoned them!

But then... a tragedy happens. Their joy is shortlived. "The Lord killed seventy men because they looked into the Ark of the Lord. And the people mourned greatly because of what the Lord had done."²⁰ "Who is able to stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?" they cried out. "Where can we send the Ark from here?"¹¹

God strikes down the men who looked into the ark with *another plague*. The NIV says more clearly, "The people mourned because of the *heavy* blow the Lord had dealt them."¹² The heavy hand of God—God's glory—strikes Israel in judgment for looking into the ark. Why? It seems like an innocent act. Maybe they just want to see whether the Philistines took the tablets of the covenant out from it. We talked last week about how God's glory isn't truly contained in a box, so why would he strike them down?

¹¹ 1 Sam 6:19–20, NLT

¹² 1 Sam 6:19, NIV

There are explicit instructions given to the people of God in the book of Numbers: *don't touch or look at the holy things, or you will die.*¹³ We've already seen how the priesthood during the time of the judges was corrupt and irreverent. Eli and his sons are not leading Israel to worship and revere their delivering, saving God with the reverence that he is owed. This command to "not look at the holy things" has apparently been lost over the centuries—you'd think they would remember something this important, but apparently not. The passing on of the Law by the priesthood has been neglected, so they are ignorant of what God had told them about *how* to approach him.

The people are God's in name only; they behave just like the Philistines do and are treated in kind just like the Philistines were—God sends a plague on them. There is, essentially, no difference between the Israelites and the Philistines. Both are people who have treated God as something to be used for their own gain. They have treated him with irreverence. They can't conceive of a God who is so much greater, more powerful, and more just than the pagan gods; they can only think of him in terms of their polytheistic culture.

And so, they hide the ark away in the hill country. For twenty years, the ark doesn't move, doesn't return to the tabernacle, for fear of what God would do to them if they tried. The people of God mourn "because it seemed the Lord had abandoned them."¹⁴ The ark had returned—the glory of God had returned!—but it was a cause for sorrow instead of joy *because they did not know how to properly approach him*. Their irreverence and ignorance have resulted in death—for them, and for the Philistines.

This is no happy story with a happy ending. It is tragic—the people are lost without a shepherd. The question lingers: "*Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?*" The only hope in this story is that this is not the end. God has not given up on his people; God's story is not yet over.

In just a few more decades, King David writes psalm 15 to answer exactly this question:

Who may worship in your sanctuary, Lord?

Who may enter your presence on your holy hill?

²Those who lead blameless lives and do what is right,
speaking the truth from sincere hearts.

³Those who refuse to gossip
or harm their neighbors
or speak evil of their friends.

⁴Those who despise flagrant sinners,

¹³ Num 4:15, 20

¹⁴ 1 Sam 7:2, NLT

and honor the faithful followers of the Lord,
and keep their promises even when it hurts.

⁵Those who lend money without charging interest,
and who cannot be bribed to lie about the innocent.
Such people will stand firm forever.¹⁵

Much later in Israel's history, the prophet Micah says: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."¹⁶

Act justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly with your God.

The story of God in 1 Samuel says that he is a God who longs to be known, but on *his terms* not ours. Are you unsure how to worship and obey this holy, mighty, intangible God? He's told you how to do it, right here in this book. You have to know what it says: Do what is right. Speak truth sincerely. Don't gossip. Honor the people of God. Keep your promises even when it hurts. Be generous. Be a person of integrity.

Know God. Be known by God. Revere him, worship him, and love him.

In doing so, you will be *different* from those who don't know the God who created and called each and every one of you. You will be so different in your love, kindness, mercy, humility, and justice that they will encounter the living, holy God who makes his glory known within and through you. And thank God for that, that his story is not done in every one of us.

¹⁵ Ps 15:1–5, NLT

¹⁶ Mic 6:8