

# Who Is Able To Stand Before The Lord?

*Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies (1 Samuel 4:3b ESV)*

## **Who Is Able To Stand Before The Lord?**

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**1 Samuel 4-6**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning! It is so good to be together again! Pastor Paul is on holidays, so we have decided to press pause on our “I Believe” series for one more week. This morning, I want to turn your attention to an unfamiliar Old Testament story. Please look with me in your Bibles to 1 Samuel 4.

What a year this has been. I don't know about you, but I'm sick of the news. I'm so tired of living in a state of reaction. I'm weary of soundbites. I'm not particularly convinced that anyone has a clue what's going on.

And yet, I am at peace. Because the Lord has been drawing me this year to meditate on Him. In the midst of an ever-changing world, I am so thankful for my unchanging God. I just want to know more about Him. I want to know who He is. I want to know what He's like. I want to challenge all of my old ideas and my cultural bias and just BEHOLD HIM!

And as I've been pressing in deeper this past year, I have been so captivated by His holiness. He's just not like us. He's in a whole other category. He's unblemished and perfect and righteous and infinite and AWESOME and holy, holy, holy! Famous Christian leaders are being exposed, and politicians are flailing about and there's infighting all around us but I'm not feeling the same anxiety this time around because LOOK AT HIM! He's got this! All is as a sea of glass before Him.

And as we behold His holiness, we become increasingly aware of how unholy we are. Church, I am a sinner saved by grace. I do not deserve what Jesus did for me on that cross. I could never

earn the forgiveness I've received. I am no better than anyone in this city. I'm just a sinner who has been washed in the blood of the Lamb.

Why am I saying all of this? You will never understand Christianity – you will never understand why the Son of God died on a Roman cross – unless you see and affirm these two truths: God is holy, and we are not. Our text this morning unpacks both of those truths and presents us with THE question of the Old Testament: How can sinful people live with a holy God?

Today, we are going to review what commentators call “the ark narrative.” Before we begin, I want to spend a quick moment making sure that we all understand what the ark of the covenant was and, more importantly, what it represented.

Physically speaking, the ark was a large, golden box which encased the most significant relics of the exodus events. In the ark there was a jar of manna to commemorate God's provision in the wilderness, and there was Aaron's staff, but most importantly, the ark held the stone tablets on which God Himself wrote the ten commandments for His people. On top of the ark, two golden angels or cherubim were sculpted. These angels were reminiscent of the angel that guarded the entrance to Eden. Do you remember that part of the story? After Adam and Eve had sinned against God, they were kicked out of the Garden of Eden – cast out from the presence of God! In Genesis 3:24, we read:

He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:24 ESV)

This leads us to the most significant detail that we need to understand about the ark: The ark was representative of God's presence with His people. It was like a giant throne on which the invisible King of Kings sat. The ark was a sobering, glorious reminder that the Holy, Holy, Holy God had graciously condescended to dwell with the Israelites.

But, as we will learn in today's text, it is dangerous for sinful people to coexist with a Holy God. In this ark narrative there are essentially three “scenes” for lack of a better word. Any one of those scenes could occupy all of our time this morning. However, we will do a quick survey of all three

and focus in on one detail: Each of these scenes presents us with a sobering warning about living in the presence of the Holy God.

### **Living In The Presence Of The Holy God: Three Warnings**

We find our first warning in chapter 4. Look with me at verses 1-11:

Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek.<sup>2</sup> The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle.<sup>3</sup> And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, “Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.”<sup>4</sup> So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

<sup>5</sup> As soon as the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded.<sup>6</sup> And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, “What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?” And when they learned that the ark of the Lord had come to the camp,<sup>7</sup> the Philistines were afraid, for they said, “A god has come into the camp.” And they said, “Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before.<sup>8</sup> Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness.<sup>9</sup> Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight.”

<sup>10</sup> So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell.<sup>11</sup> And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died. (1 Samuel 4:1b-11 ESV)

That was a lot of text, so let me give a quick summary: The Israelites went out to battle with the Philistines and experienced a serious defeat. As they regrouped, they remembered that God was the One who had given them victory in the past. Therefore, they assumed that if they simply brought the ark of the covenant with them into the battle – the visible representation of God’s presence in their midst – then they would surely have success! Unfortunately, their plan was fundamentally flawed. They were routed again, and the ark of God was captured by the Philistines.

Now, before we pull the warning out of this text, I want to acknowledge that there was a moment of wisdom in this scene. After their first battle in which the Israelites lost 4,000 men, they said:

Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines? (1 Samuel 4:3b ESV)

This was a wise observation! The Israelites were quick to recognize that the Philistines – as formidable as they were – were no match for the Lord! They had suffered a defeat, but it couldn't have been because of the strength of their foes – who is stronger than Yahweh? Martyn Lloyd Jones notes:

When the children of Israel were in the right relationship to God, they always conquered their enemies.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, they realized, this defeat must have come from the hand of the Lord. That was their initial response, and it was very wise. When hardships come our way our first response is often to survey our problems. “Look at this issue! Look at this hardship!” But wisdom looks past pressing circumstances and looks up to the One who is Lord OVER circumstances.

Unfortunately, this little glimmer of wisdom quickly dissolved into foolishness. And that brings us to our first warning:

### **Warning 1: God will not be your good luck charm**

The Israelites realized, “We lost, because God wasn't with us!” And they were right! And that knowledge should have led them to repentance! They should have said, “We are supposed to follow You, but we never surrendered this plan to you. That was foolish, and we repent!” They should have said that. Instead, they said, “God, we're going this way. We forgot to bring you along with us last time, but we won't make that mistake again.” So, they called for the ark and brought it with them into battle. Like a lucky rabbit's foot. As one commentator notes:

What the elders failed to understand, however, was that the ark was neither an infallible talisman nor a military palladium that would insure victory. If God willed defeat for his people, a thousand arks would not bring success.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 63.

The problem wasn't that they forgot to bring God with them. The problem was that they forgot who was steering the ship! The holy, holy, holy God of the universe is not a good luck charm that you tuck in your back pocket before your next adventure.

This problem – this arrogance – is not unique to the Israelites. We all face this temptation on a daily basis. Let me ask you a blunt question: In your life, is God leading the way? Or are you blazing your own path and simply bringing God with you on the ride like a good luck charm?

Who leads this church? Who leads your family? Who is in charge of your day planner? Who's plans are the only plans that matter?

We daily face the temptation to take the reins out of His hands, don't we? Some days, it might be dinnertime before we even stop to acknowledge His existence. So, tell me again, who do we believe is in charge?

The Bible is clear about this: We will see defeat after defeat in this church and in our homes and in our lives unless we get this right. I was recently speaking with a young man who was considering making this church family his home. He asked me lots of questions about where I thought that we were strong and where I thought that we were weak. I answered him as honestly as I could and, truth be told, it was a helpful exercise. I see so much to celebrate in this church family, and it is easy for me to bubble over with thanksgiving for all that God is doing in and through us.

But, while I see so many strengths, I also see a weakness. And this particular weakness is the kind that might sink the whole ship if it's not addressed – it's the exact same weakness that saw the Israelites struck down on the battlefield as the ark was carried away.

Church, I fear that we are weak in prayer.

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald F. Youngblood, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Deuteronomy – 1&2 Samuel)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelien, vol. 3, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 595.

And unless God changes that in us, that weakness will spread into every other area. A church that is weak in prayer is like a car that is weak in gas. It's like an orchard that is weak in sunlight. It's like a waterfall that is weak in water. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones once said:

I am certain that I am right when I say that until we come to the end of our own self-reliance (it does not matter what form it takes), until the church is crushed to her knees, and has come to the end of her own power and ability, and looks to God for his power and the might of the Holy Spirit – until then I am certain that the declension will continue and even increase.<sup>3</sup>

If we cultivate a habit of making decisions in our church, and in our families and in our lives without first bringing those decisions to the Lord in prayer, then how are we any different than the Israelites in this story? “My family is going this way. Make sure somebody loads up the ark! We don't want to lose God's blessing on our plans.”

He refuses to be the good luck charm that we attach to our best-laid plans. He demands to be the Author of the plans! And He will lead in the implementation of those plans and He will give us strength for the execution of those plans, and He will go before us and bless those plans! Do you want to position yourself to perceive the plans of the Lord? Pray. In humility, bow down and ask Him to lead.

But this is the one to whom I will look:  
he who is humble and contrite in spirit  
and trembles at my word. (Isaiah 66:2b ESV)

We find the second warning in chapter 5. Look with me there now, beginning in verse 1:

When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. <sup>2</sup> Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. <sup>3</sup> And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. <sup>4</sup> But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. <sup>5</sup> This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

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<sup>3</sup> Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 64-65.

<sup>6</sup> The hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory. <sup>7</sup> And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, “The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god.” <sup>8</sup> So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, “What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?” They answered, “Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath.” So they brought the ark of the God of Israel there. <sup>9</sup> But after they had brought it around, the hand of the Lord was against the city, causing a very great panic, and he afflicted the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them. <sup>10</sup> So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. But as soon as the ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, “They have brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people.” <sup>11</sup> They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, “Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people.” For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there. <sup>12</sup> The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven. (1 Samuel 5:1-12 ESV)

Here, we find our second warning:

**Warning 2: God won't share a room with your idols**

When the Philistines captured the ark – when they got their hands on the God of the Israelites who had conquered the Egyptians – they knew that they had acquired a real prize! They were so impressed with the God of Jacob, in fact, that they set His ark next to the statue of their national deity – Dagon. This was a sign of utmost respect. They were willing to share Dagon's temple with the Israelite God.

But the next day, as they walked into Dagon's temple, they found the statue of their god lying face down before the ark of the covenant.

So, they dusted off their god, and they set him back up in his place.

But the next day, they found him facedown again, only this time his head and his hands had broken off from his torso.

So, they picked up their god and they began to piece him back together. They even venerated the place where his severed members had laid.

Then the priests who had no doubt grown weary of reassembling Dagon sent the ark away from Ashdod to the city of Gath. However, when the ark came into the city, its inhabitants broke out in tumours. In a panic, they sent the ark from Gath to Ekron, but the same thing happened there.

This story is almost comical, isn't it? Time after time, God exposed the futility of the Philistine idol. He knocked it down, and then he knocked it down again breaking it into pieces, but rather than turning from their idol and worshiping the living, powerful God, they kept picking their idol up and piecing it back together.

The Philistines assumed that their lives would be uninterrupted by the presence of the God of Israel. They had heard of His powerful works, and they thought that they could simply “add Him to the mix” of their own lives and enjoy His benefits. But they very quickly realized that God would not make peace with their sin. He would not share a room with idols. As Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones observed:

The God who kept throwing Dagon to the floor in his own temple is disturbing our life. He will not allow men to enjoy life apart from himself. He has told us: ‘There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.’<sup>4</sup>

The idea of picking a statue up off of the floor and rebuilding it each day is laughable to us. We look at the Philistines in disbelief and ask, “Why would you ever return to an idol that SO CLEARLY has no power to save you?” And then we chuckle to ourselves, “Those silly Philistines.”

And yet we return to worship the idol of food when we have spent so many days lamenting the effects of our overeating. We prop up the idol of that sinful relationship even though the last sinful relationship shattered and hurt everyone around us. We return to the idol of laziness even though it always leads to self-loathing. We stand up the idol of pornography even though it nearly crushed our marriage in its last collapse. As John Calvin famously said:

Hence we may infer, that the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 67.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 55.



The sinful human heart will always be ready to forge another idol. But if you want to live in the presence of the holy God, you need to know that He is the God who knocks idols down. Don't be the fool who stands them back up.

Like a dog that returns to his vomit  
is a fool who repeats his folly. (Proverbs 26:11 ESV)

What is your idol? What do you look to for life and satisfaction? What do you turn to when you are at the end of your strength? What do you go to when you know that you need comfort? What do you live for? Is that idol satisfying your deepest need? Or is it just as powerless as Dagon?

Church, I would hazard to guess that God has knocked down some idols in our lives over this past year. He has revealed the powerlessness of some of the things that we place far too much trust in. As restrictions lift, everyone around you is going to be running as fast as they can to rebuild everything that has fallen down. But maybe some things don't need to be rebuilt. Maybe some things need to stay in a heap of rubble on the floor. Maybe instead of rebuilding what we had, we should seek the Lord and build our lives around what should have been at the center all along. One thing is for certain, our God is a God who will not share a room with your idols.

We find our third and final warning in chapter 6.

The Philistines had decided that they were done with their experiment. If the ark was going to stay with them then some things were going to have to change. But they didn't want things to change so they sent the ark back to the Israelites. They put it on a cart and attached it to some cows, and those cows walked a straight line back to Beth-shemesh. We're going to read verses 11-16 and then we're going to jump ahead to verse 19. Look there with me now:

And they put the ark of the Lord on the cart and the box with the golden mice and the images of their tumors.<sup>12</sup> And the cows went straight in the direction of Beth-shemesh along one highway, lowing as they went. They turned neither to the right nor to the left, and the lords of the Philistines went after them as far as the border of Beth-shemesh.<sup>13</sup> Now the people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. And when they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, they rejoiced to see it.<sup>14</sup> The cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there. A great stone was there. And they split up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord.<sup>15</sup> And the Levites took down the ark of the Lord and the box that was beside it,

in which were the golden figures, and set them upon the great stone. And the men of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices on that day to the Lord. <sup>16</sup> And when the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned that day to Ekron.

<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> Then the men of Beth-shemesh said, “Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?” <sup>21</sup> So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, “The Philistines have returned the ark of the Lord. Come down and take it up to you.” (1 Samuel 6:11-16, 19-21 ESV)

Now, there is a lot to unpack here, but I think we can summarize it with this final warning:

### **Warning 3: God will only be approached on His own terms**

When the ark arrived in Beth-shemesh, everyone was overjoyed! God had previously instructed His people that only the Levites were to move the ark, so the people of Beth-shemesh wisely had some of the Levites with them remove the ark from the cart. They set up a large stone, built a fire with the wood from the cart and sacrificed the cattle as an act of worship. Everything seemed to be going so well.

But then, some of the men in the camp allowed their curiosity to get the best of them. They looked at the ark and God struck down all 70 of them.

This detail is jarring, so let’s unpack it. One critical detail to note is that the men of Beth-shemesh knew God’s instructions about the ark. That’s why they had the Levites move it in the first place. Yet, while they obeyed THAT instruction, they disregarded what God said in Numbers 4. There, God 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.** (Numbers 4:5 ESV)

Aaron and his sons were to cover the ark because the ark was holy. It was set apart. It was not an item for display and curiosity. It represented the presence of the holy God! In verse 20, God warned:

but they shall not go in to look on the holy things even for a moment, **lest they die.**  
(Numbers 4:20 ESV)

I know that this strikes our modern sensitivities as overkill, but that's because we are inclined to take the holiness of God lightly. We ask, "Well why couldn't those men look at the ark? Why couldn't they open it up and inspect it? What is God trying to hide?" But that line of questioning reveals our irreverence. Do you remember what the ark was meant to represent? It was symbolic of the presence of God! It represented the throne of the Holy King of Kings! It was guarded by two golden cherubim to symbolize the angels guarding the entrance to the garden of Eden with flaming swords – the garden we were KICKED OUT OF because of our sin!

The imagery served as a reminder that our sin has created a gap between us and our holy God. He is too pure to be in the presence of our wickedness.

So, when He graciously made a way for His presence to dwell in the midst of His people, He put some rules in place. Even in His nearness, there was a distance that existed because of the sin of His people. These men in Beth-shemesh knew the rules – after all, they had the Israelites remove the ark from the cart. They knew God's rules, but for some reason, they disregarded them. Either they thought too little of their own sin or they thought too little of God's holiness, but either way, they gave themselves permission to carelessly disregard His instructions. And they died.

And then the remaining Israelites in Beth-shemesh said the most profound words that we find in this entire story – words that could summarize the entire Old Testament! They said:

Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? (1 Samuel 6:20b ESV)

That is the question. It's a question that we don't ask often enough because, frankly, I think we've come to take the answer for granted.

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

Can you? Are you any better than these men? They were struck down for even looking at His throne! Is your sin any less repulsive than theirs? Or are you better than the Philistines? Is it less

offensive to God when you place your trust in your idols then it was when they placed their trust in theirs? We have all sinned against God and the penalty for our sin is death.

Who is able to stand?

Who is sinless?

Who could walk past the angels with their flaming swords and make a way back into Eden?

Who could approach the throne where God sits in the splendour of holiness?

The ark was gracious because it represented the presence of God, but it also served as a devastating reminder that in order for His presence to be good news, something needs to be done about our sin.

How can we, who are stained with sin, have peace with God? Look at what happens to sinners in the presence of a holy God!! Where do we go from here?

We needed more than an ark! We needed a peacemaker! We needed a sinless saviour! We needed a Godman, who could finally do for us what we could never do for ourselves! And God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son for us. The Apostle Paul marvelled:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,<sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.  
(Colossians 1:19-20 ESV)

Our peace was purchased with the blood of the cross. Because of the sin of Adam, we were cast out of God's presence, but because of the life, death and resurrection of the true and better Adam we have been invited back in! Friends, you can have peace with God today!

However, God hasn't changed, therefore you need to hear these warnings loud and clear.

Would you have peace with God? Do you want to know Him and enjoy His presence forever?

Then you need to know that He will not be your good luck charm. He's not interested in coming

along for the ride. He's not interested in tagging along with your plans. He doesn't follow you – you follow Him. Wherever he leads. That's the deal.

And He is not willing to share your affection with lifeless idols. He'll knock them down. He'll use discomfort to reveal the lingering sin in your heart. He'll expose the futility of all of the lesser things that you used to place at the center of your life. And it will hurt. But it's for your good. Those idols can't save you! Those idols will never satisfy you! The Puritan Richard Baxter asks:

What are these things you set so much by as to prefer them before Christ and the saving of your soul? Have you found a better friend, a greater and a surer happiness than this?<sup>6</sup>

What a friend we have in Jesus! What a saviour! What a love! So, let go of your sin, and lay hold of Christ! Stop picking those idols up off of the floor. Leave them there, in a heap of rubble, where they belong. God won't share a room with your idols. That's the deal.

And finally, He will only be approached on His terms. Thankfully, His terms are as simple as they are glorious. Jesus said:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6 ESV)

Those are His terms. Would you have peace with God? Then surrender any notion that you had of earning that relationship with your effort. You can't do it. You can't impress Him, or pay Him off, or deceive Him into welcoming you into His kingdom. There is only one way to the Father and that is through His Son, Jesus Christ.

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel. (Mark 1:15 ESV)

The God who is holy, holy, holy has opened the door to the garden and He is inviting you to come home!

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Baxter, *Treasury of the World's Great Sermons*, 23.

And here, we have found the answer to that question which permeates throughout the Old Testament: Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? Anyone who has placed their trust in His Son, Jesus Christ. That's who. So come ye sinners! Come and live! Come and bow! Come and surrender! This is our hope. This is our good news. This is our way back to the presence of God! And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.