

Message #13

I Samuel 6:1-9

There will be times in our lives when we as believers do foolish things. There will be times when we do not glorify God the way we should. There will be moments when we blow it and botch it. In fact, probably there will be times when we find ourselves in a situation, when all we can do is wait on God and hope He will bail us out.

Years ago there was a man who fell into terrible sin and it cost him his ministry. He repented but had to live with the guilt and consequences of what he had done. He got a secular job to earn a living, but his heart was not really in it. He had no intention of ever going back into ministry. He had moments of deep regret and depression. One day a church needed a guest speaker and the minister, who knew the situation, asked the man to fill the pulpit. This opened the door for him once again to preach. Over time the minister left and moved to another church and the man who had filled the pulpit was asked if he would consider becoming the minister. The board knew about the problem the man had many years before this and, as a result, God sovereignly moved and gave him another chance and He delivered him from his stupidity and sin.

If ever you want to see a story like that in the Bible, it is this story in I Samuel. When we come to this passage, Israel was at a real low. Her spiritual status was pathetic. In fact, this was the reason she found herself in such a mess. God had judged her because she was unfaithful. Twice, the Israelites had lost to the Philistines. They were losing land and they had lost the most precious thing of all, “the Ark of the Covenant.” There was nothing Israel could seemingly do to rectify any of this. They couldn’t go to war with the Philistines because they had already defeated them. The people were depressed, their spirits were crushed and they were in total despair. Frankly, they deserved to be in this condition.

But it was in this very context that God graciously and remarkably worked. He got the ark back for them without any help from anyone, and this would eventually ignite a major swing in the spiritual, emotional and physical status of Israel.

There is an amazing lesson to see and learn from this text:

WHEN GOD’S PEOPLE ARE TOTALLY DEPRESSED BECAUSE THEY HAVE DONE SOMETHING TO DESERVE GOD’S NEGATIVE CHASTISEMENT, GOD WILL REMAIN FAITHFUL TO HIMSELF AND GRACIOUSLY TURN HIS CHASTISEMENT INTO BLESSING.

These foolish Israelites had lost the most sacred thing they had—the Ark of God. They lost it by their own stupidity and lack of spirituality. So God, in an amazing display of grace, got the ark back Himself. He sovereignly made life so miserable for the Philistines that they wanted to get rid of the ark and get it back to Israel.

There are three important facts to observe here:

FACTUAL OBSERVATION #1 – The ark had been in the Philistine country for seven months.
6:1

The number seven is a critical number of the Bible. It is a number that speaks of the completed and perfect work of God. It is clearly a number connected to judgment. In fact, in Revelation there are seven seal judgments, seven trumpet judgments and seven bowl judgments. The Tribulation will be a seven year judgment.

What this number seven says here is that God had done what He deemed necessary to carry out His complete judgment against the Philistines in seven months. He wreaked havoc with the Philistines for a literal seven month period.

One would have logically thought that having the Ark of the Covenant for seven months would have been the seven most wonderful months the Philistines had ever experienced. The truth is these seven months had been the most miserable months they had ever experienced. Everywhere the ark had been in the Philistine land had caused affliction.

The Septuagint says that the land had been filled with a plague of mice for the entire seven months. I am certain that when the Philistines first captured the ark, they thought it would make them happy, but the truth is it made them totally miserable.

This is what the word of God does for an unbeliever. The word of God will make life miserable for an unbeliever. That word of God that offers salvation also speaks of condemnation. So for one not right with God, the word of God is not a soothing book.

Unbelievers may try to tamper with and destroy something sacred. They believe it will make them happy. What they do not realize is that will be the worst thing they ever did. It may take some time but eventually things will catch up with them and they will end up miserable as a judgment of God. The ability to enjoy life is a grant from God and the same sovereign God who can cause one to enjoy things can also make life miserable. He did that with these Philistines.

God has a silent, secret, sovereign plan for all disasters, catastrophes and afflictions. He will use things like that to accomplish His purposes.

I saw an interesting painting in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, a few years ago that really stuck in my mind. An artistic cowboy had painted a picture of a violent storm that was taking place out with the cattle and cowboys. The picture showed the cattle crossing a river in the midst of the storm. The title of the painting was “Changing Pastures.” The storm was actually going to cause the cattle to move to a better pasture.

That is how God sovereignly works. He causes storms to hit which actually accomplish His purposes and at times He uses those storms for the ultimate betterment of His own people. That is what is happening here.

FACTUAL OBSERVATION #2 – The Philistines ask their religious leaders to get rid of the ark and send it back to Israel. **6:2**

What an interesting series of developments. In **chapter 4 the Philistines capture the ark**. In **chapter 5 the Philistines pass the ark**. In **chapter 6 the Philistines give back the ark**.

They want to send the ark back to Israel, so they contacted their religious leaders to come up with a plan to do it.

The “priests” were priests of false religion and the “diviners” were a group of Satanic agents who supposedly got their revelatory information from the extra-sensory realm. The priests were priests of Dagon. They controlled the idolatrous worship. So combined, these two groups of religious people were the most godless groups in the Philistine world.

In fact, “diviners” were so evil and satanic that the Israelites were not to consult with them and if they did, they could be put to death (Deut. 18:9-14; Lev. 19:31, 20:27).

The Philistine people called these two godless groups together and said they wanted to know how to go about getting rid of the Ark of the Covenant and getting it back to Israel. They are asking the heretic religious leaders how to do this.

Who would ever think God could use demonic religious leaders to accomplish His purposes? That is exactly what He is doing here. God is actually going to work in the minds of these godless heathens to accomplish His will.

He actually puts in their minds and hearts the idea that we need to get rid of this and get it back to Israel. It is truly an amazing thing to realize that God is sovereign even over evil, Satanic religion and their leaders.

FACTUAL OBSERVATION #3 – The Philistine religious leaders devise a plan to get the Ark back to Israel. **6:3-9**

There is an amazing display of the sovereignty of God in all of this. There are two steps to the process of getting the ark back to Israel:

Step #1 - Send a guilt offering along with the ark. **6:3-6**

The false priest and Satanic diviners advised to send a guilt offering so that they can be healed of the judgmental problems plaguing them. Also if they sent the ark along with the guilt offering, they would know this would be the reason for the plague, if it stopped.

According to **verse 9** some apparently thought this happened by the judgment hand of God and others thought it happened by chance.

Josephus, in his *Antiquities*, described what happened: “At first they thought proper to send the ark back to its own people, as allowing that God had avenged its cause; that the miseries they had undergone came along with it, and that these were sent on their cities upon its account and together with it. However, there were those that said they should not do so, nor suffer themselves to be deluded, as ascribing the cause of their miseries to it, because it could not have such power and force upon them: for, had God had such a regard to it, it would not have been delivered into the hands of men: so they exhorted them to be quiet, and to take patiently what had befallen them, and to suppose there was no other cause of it but nature, which, at certain revolutions of time, produces such mutations in the bodies of men, in the earth, in plants, and in all things that grow out of the earth. But the counsel that prevailed over those already described, was that of certain men, who were believed to have distinguished themselves in former times for their understanding and prudence and who, in their present circumstances, seemed above all the rest to speak properly. These men said, it was not right either to send the ark away, or to retain it, but to dedicate five golden images, one for every city, as a thank offering to God, on account of his having taken care of their preservation, and having kept them alive when their lives were likely to be taken away by such distempers as they were not able to bear up against. They also would have them make five golden mice like to those that devoured and destroyed their country, to put them in a bag and lay them upon the ark; to make them a new cart also for it and to yoke milch kine to it” (*The Complete Works of Josephus*, p. 124).

Their idea was if they did everything to show God they mean business, send the ark back, offer a guilt offering, then, if God lifted the plague, they would know this had come as a direct judgment from Him. It is amazing that these false leaders had this kind of sense about them.

Now **verse 4** gives us the essence of their offering—five golden tumors or boils and five golden mice. According to **verse 5** these were the two plagues that had hit the Philistines.

There are different references to mice in the Bible and they are always viewed as detestable and unclean (i.e. Lev. 11:29; Is. 66:17). Aristotle, in his *History of Animals*, says, “In many places mice are wont to appear in such unspeakable numbers, that scarce anything is left of the whole crop. So rapidly do they consume corn, that in some cases small farmers have observed their crops ripe and ready for the sickle on one day, and coming the next with the reapers, have found them entirely devoured?”

There is a story in history written by Herodotus in which he claims that when the Assyrian army of Sennacherib was defeated, it was due to field mice that had overrun his camp and had gnawed many of the bow strings leading to defeat.

The number five represents a sacrifice for each of the five Philistine cities. There were five confederate cities that housed a key leader so five represented each one.

Verse 6 makes it clear that the religious leaders warned the Philistines not to harden their hearts to this council because the Egyptians hardened their hearts to God’s plagues and did not repent and they paid a high price.

When the Egyptians would not let the Israelites go, they were punished. If the Philistines did not let the ark go, they would be punished.

God was warning the Philistines through their evil, corrupt, satanic leadership. God can sovereignly intervene and even in the lives of those caught up in false religion.

Step #2 - Build a new cart and connect it to two cows and let them go and see where they go.
6:7-9

The plan they came up with was truly a plan that would require the sovereignty of God's intervention. First of all, to take two cows that never had been trained to be yoked and have them calmly walk together side-by-side without bucking and twisting and turning would be very unusual.

Second, to take two mother cows and expect them to walk away from their calves would be something never seen.

The word "milch" refers to cows who are nursing calves (Gen. 33:13).

According to **verse 7**, the priests wanted to build a new cart that would carry the Ark of the Covenant. You do have to admire this. So many churches want to do things second rate; these heathen Philistines wanted something new and nice.

What they wanted them to do was to take calves away from their mothers and hook the mothers to the cart, who had never pulled a cart. If the mothers headed toward God's territory, away from their calves, God had done it. If they turned toward their calves, God had not done it.

Let's face it, if you separate a calf from its mother you are heading for trouble. That mother will naturally want to be with the calf. If the two mothers walk away from their calves, God did it.

According to **verse 9**, if the cows headed toward Beth-shemesh, this was of God. Beth-shemesh was a Levitical, priestly city (Joshua 21:16). It was located about eight miles south-east of Ekron.

PRACTICAL LESSONS:

- 1) In our worst moments of stupidity and failure, God is still sovereign.**
- 2) It is disgraceful when false religion has a better reverence for God than true religion.**
- 3) God can and does use those godless to accomplish His sovereign purposes.**
- 4) If you do something stupid, confess it to God, claim His forgiveness and go on.
What may seem to be the end may not be the end.**