

The Ark: Predicament

The Ark

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One of the most famous scenes in Hollywood history is taken out of 1 Samuel chapter six. The conclusion of the original *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* where their pride and arrogance the lid of the ark is removed and those who are watching are destroyed. We find that famous scene here in 1 Samuel chapter six. But as we turn to this passage of Scripture the message that it has for us today is not just about the lid of an ark being taken and thousands of people being killed, but it forces us to answer some questions like how did we get the mess that we are in today. How did our communities, how did our culture, how did our world get in the mess that it has gotten in today? And I think every one of us could say on some level or some degree we got ourselves, we are in a mess. The question is: What do we do? Everybody is wondering how to get out of it, but nobody has diagnosed how we got into it. And you can't get out of something unless you know how you got in.

So in 1 Samuel chapter six and seven today, we are going to discover how did the Israelites get themselves in a royal mess of life and it is going to show us how we have gotten ourselves in a mess and the solution for Israel is the same for our culture as well.

In 1 Samuel chapter six beginning in verse 13, the ark of the covenant returning to the people of Israel. It says:

And they of Bethshemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley: and they lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it. And the cart came into the field of Joshua, a Bethshemite, and stood there, where there was a great stone: and they clave the wood of the cart, and offered the kine a burnt offering unto the LORD. And the Levites took down the ark of the LORD, and the coffer that was with it, wherein the jewels of gold were, and put them on the great stone: and the men of Bethshemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices the same day unto the LORD. And when the five lords of the Philistines had seen it, they returned to Ekron the same day. And these are the golden emerods which the Philistines returned for a trespass offering unto the LORD; for Ashdod one, for Gaza one, for Askelon one, for Gath one, for Ekron one; And the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the

Philistines belonging to the five lords, both of fenced cities, and of country villages, even unto the great stone of Abel, whereon they set down the ark of the LORD: which stone remaineth unto this day in the field of Joshua, the Bethshemite.

And he smote the men of Bethshemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD, even he smote of the people fifty thousand and threescore and ten men: and the people lamented, because the LORD had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter. And the men of Bethshemesh said, Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? and to whom shall he go up from us? And they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjathjearim, saying, The Philistines have brought again the ark of the LORD; come ye down, and fetch it up to you.

And the men of Kirjathjearim came, and fetched up the ark of the LORD, and brought it into the house of Abinadab in the hill, and sanctified Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the LORD. And it came to pass, while the ark abode in Kirjathjearim, that the time was long; for it was twenty years: and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.

And Samuel spake unto all the house of Israel, saying, If ye do return unto the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the LORD, and serve him only: and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.¹

Now what we find ourselves in in 1 Samuel six and seven at the very end of this series on the famed ark of the covenant is we find the Israelite people, the people of God in a predicament. They are in a situation where they must make a decision. Do they continue to worship Ashtoreth and the foreign pagan gods or do they repent and turn their heart to the Lord?

What I want to show you from the Word of God today is that our culture, our society, our communities are no different than Israel was in these days. And the key verse we are going to have is in chapter seven verse three when he says:

“And Samuel spake unto all the house of Israel, saying, If ye do return unto the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashtoreth from among you.”²

And the first thing that I want to address today from the Word of God is this. The parallel between Israel and the world you and I live in today. In fact, it is an eerie parallel. And in verse three of chapter seven when Samuel addresses the people of Israel he does not say, “Well, you are just going down the wrong road doing wrong things with wrong people who you shouldn’t be with.” He said, “Put away the strange gods and Ashtoreth.”

¹ 1 Samuel 6:13—2:3.

² 1 Samuel 7:3.

Later on in this same chapter the word Baal will come in reference to. And Ashtoreth and Baal are basically two sides to the same coin of what we currently know or in the past known as Baal worship. Ashtoreth was the female goddess. Baal was the male goddess.

Some of the best pictures that we have in Scripture of this type of worship is when Moses is on the mount for 40 days and he brings the 10 Commandments down. Remember, the quote, unquote, party that was occurring at the bottom of the hill. That was a party dedicated to Baal and to Ashtoreth. Ashtoreth was the female deity that Jezebel held in such high esteem. And it is very specific here. He says, "You are worshipping Ashtoreth," not just some random. He specifically says the one. What this does is it gives us insight into what these people were actually doing and it is an eerie parallel to the culture and the world we live in today. And there is three parallels to its whole Ashtoreth Baal worship that what they were participating in in 1 Samuel six and seven is as if we lifted it off the headlines of the world today.

Now let me give warning. What we are about to deal with is somewhat graphic in nature. I will to the best of my ability use language that at times is specifically vague so as to prevent words that may seem crass, but the problem is this. We have got some problems and we have got to call out what the problems are. So here is the first thing that we need to understand that is a parallel between the Israelites of 1 Samuel six and seven and our world today. The parallel of sexuality. In the days of Israel with Ashtoreth, Ashtoreth. If you do any study on Baal worship and Ashtoreth and all this stuff, rampant, rampant sexuality, idols and images that are erotic at the least. Everything about it centered around and was geared toward what we know a freedom of human sexuality.

That is why in the New Testament when we get to 1 Corinthians and they talk about the fact that they were going to the temple and laying with the, quote prostitutes that is a derivative of Ashtoreth and Baal worship. It is all throughout the Old Testament. When he came down from the mount you remember what Moses said they were doing. Anything with anybody at any time.

We live in a world today where it seems like when it comes to this concept or idea, no freedom is enough freedom. And I think in recent days there has been a headline in the media that has caught my attention maybe like no other headline in recent days. For we will begin in just a few days the four year tradition of the Olympiad where the finest athletes from all over the world gather together in a union of competition, games of good will. The idea to see who runs the fastest, who jumps the highest, who is the strongest. The games go back to the Greek and Roman days. Obviously they have been revived this last 100 plus years. You may not be familiar with this headline, but feel free to go and research it, that there is so much concern for the health and the well being and the activities of the Olympians in this Olympics period that the Olympians when they arrive will be passed out 150,000 free prophylactics, 150,000 items used to prevent unwanted consequence to sexual freedom.

Let me do some math for you. That is 15 per athlete for a three week time period. We got

some problems, folks. And the company that is handing them out, listen to this quote. We have an extra 50,000 on standby in case of an emergency.

I have never heard of one of those emergencies before, but I guess it could happen in London, 150,000. The last Olympiad they went through 100. The one before that was 75. You go all the way back and what you see is every four years it escalates. And we are starting to see the stories of the athletes saying that when they are in the village behind closed doors without the media and without the attention of their coaches and their parents and their spouses, that it is a fraternity party turned crazy. Many stories of athletes desiring to go not just so that they can compete in events, but they can compete in the after events {?}.

How dare we say, “How did they get in that position?”

Folks, we are in the same position. A rampant sexuality.

The second thing about Ashtoreth and Baal worship that took place is the term that I want to use by strict definition, even though I have put it in quotes. They were a sadistic group of people. Let me tell you what I mean by sadistic. By strict definition that term means this, to desire or to gain pleasure from either the personal experience of pain or inflicting pain upon somebody else.

Listen. We have become an ever increasing violent world where we see and seek and experience the violence on untold scales. You know, it is amazing that that which we see in video games, that which we see in movies and that which we see in TV shows before our very eyes takes place in reality. And the amazing thing is that people will say, “How did it happen?”

How did it happen? Because what we read and what we watched as a culture, we have decided, let’s just put it in to play.

And I know that there were some tragic events that took place in recent days unfortunately in the state of Colorado with an incredibly violent event that took place in our culture. But allow me just the freedom of one small commentary. One of the victims was a six year old little girl. As a parent, not as a preacher, as a parent, why is a six year old girl at a PG-13 movie at midnight? Why? Have we become that numb to violence? It just doesn’t matter anymore.

Do you realize what Baal and Ashtoreth worship would do when it came to violence? This is a famous story, 1 Kings chapter 18. Remember Elijah the lone prophet of God? They were on Mount Carmel and there were 450 Baal worshipping prophets. And they decided to have a contest. Whose God is stronger? Whose God is bigger? So what they did is they had mutual or identical sacrifices and the Baal prophets—by the way Baal, Ashtoreth, connected together. They solicited the attention of their gods all day long. The Bible says that they screamed, they hollered, they sang, they chanted, they danced. And finally it got to the point where they were absolutely desperate to get their god’s

attention. And the Bible says in 1 Kings 18 that they used knives and lancets to cut themselves.

Now I am not an expert in items of warfare, but a knife has a short blade and lance has a long blade. The knives were inflicting their own wounds and the lances were to inflict upon others. They literally start cutting themselves. They started inflicting painful violence, seeking something that they did not possess. And you know the rest of the story where nothing comes avail of the Baal worshippers. Elijah has his sacrifice soaked three times with water, the trench filled. He calls upon God and the fire falls.

The culture we live in today is incredibly, increasingly violent. Some of you may not be aware some of the stuff that is actually happening in the world today, but one of the things that is happening we have even got it on video tape, in camera, is what they are calling zombie killings. If you are not familiar what is happening in our culture today, there are people and they are saying it is because of illicit drugs or mental situations or whatever it may be. It doesn't matter. There are people on tape who literally are attacking other people and eating the skin off their faces.

I told you it was going to be graphic. That is the world you live in. We live in a world that the ands out 150,000 items to the best athletes in the world and then in the same newscast we see somebody eating somebody else's skin and yet no one says, "How did we get here?"

Folks, we didn't just get here by accident. The Israelites didn't just get there by accident, but there is one other thing that Ashtoreth and Baal worship did. It wasn't just about the sexuality. It wasn't just about the sadistic mentality and actions, it was about human sacrifice. One of the idols of the Baal worship system is an idol that comes up both in the Old and the New Testament by the name of Moloch. Moloch was an idol that desperate people and desperate families offered up their children in human sacrifice so as to appease the gods.

Now let me just say that we live in a world today that advocates this on a mass scale. Human life before often it even breathes or can speak a word is snuffed out for a multitude of reasons.

Now let me be honest with you. If you are a young lady or a young man who at one time in you life has either participated in or facilitated that occurrence, listen to me very clearly. God loves you no less than he loves me or anybody else. God can heal you just like he can heal anybody else. God can forgive you like he can forgive us. The blood of Jesus Christ covers all sin, not just everything but the one that you participated in, ok? It covers it all. But we have become a culture today that my generation is missing over 40 million people, because we decided to sacrifice over the deal with the situation. But it is not just that. Now we have gotten to the point where we are actually debating among our elected leaders is it ok to sacrifice a human life before it breathes based on the fact that we don't like the gender that is going to be born?

In the past we debated the life of the mother. In the past we debated about diseases that were in the fetus. Now it is I don't want a boy. I want a girl. I don't want a girl. I want a boy. We are no different than Moloch worship. We have become Ashtoreth worship. We have become Baal worship. Folks, we have become what they were. And Samuel comes and says, "Do you know what you need to do? You need to turn your hearts. You need to turn you life completely around, because this is messed up."

Folks, listen. We are messed up. The problem is most of us don't know how we got here. The good news is we have chapter six. And in chapter six of 1 Samuel it actually shares with us how the Israelites got to where they were. And this is how we got to where we are today. The first problem or the first way that they got to where they were is a complete indifference to the things of God.

I want you to look in verse 13.

"And they of Bethshemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley: and they lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it."³

You may look at that passage and say, "What is wrong with that? When they finally saw the ark, they got excited. In fact, one of the problems with this passage of Scripture is the number of people that were actually killed. How could 50,000 people in this small village? Well, when they were excited to see it and they call everybody from the surrounding villages, you get a big crowd quick. Look in verse one of chapter six.

The Philistines had the ark for seven months. Do you know what you do not find in 1 Samuel five, six and seven? You don't find a Caleb and a Joshua. You don't see a set of spies who go out to the land of Cana. You don't see an expedition put together saying, "Let's go back and get the ark." You don't even see a call to have a prayer meeting. There is no desire at all. They are just going back to living life and the ark shows up and they go, "Woo, hoo, it is back." A complete indifference to the things of God.

In other words, what happened and how we got in the mess we are in today is long ago we began to have the attitude that the things of God were negotiable, debatable and arbitrary.

Let me take you way back in time to a thing that has become the distant past. I remember as child a thing called blue laws. Do you all remember blue laws? The only thing open on Sunday was a cafeteria if you were lucky. Today Sunday is known as the most lucrative of the days of the shopping empire. We have become a society that says, "You know, the things of God are arbitrary. They are indifferent."

You know, sadly, decades ago when we would count church attendance and talk about how many people were at church, a regular church attender—now this is decades ago—a regular church attender was someone who was there at three, at least three or four Sundays a month. Now do you know what they designate a regular church attender as

³ 1 Samuel 6:13.

somebody who over the course of a year averages going at least 18 times. That is at least plus something every month.

Now, understand. I don't believe that going to church on Sunday morning or any day of the week gets you to heaven. Only Jesus Christ gets us to heaven. However, when we wake up on a Sunday or any other day and the things of the world are more enticing than the things of God, we have become indifferent is what we have become. And that is how it starts. When you start saying, "Well, it is not that important." Let me tell you how it starts.

One, I had a conversation with a man right before this service talking about this very subject and he recalled a conversation that we had years ago. He asked me this question. How did they start playing sporting events on Sunday? And I said "They played one game." That is how it starts. They played one game.

What we have done in our culture and even in the Church of Jesus Christ is all we have become indifferent to the things of God. They became indifferent. They are out in the field. Nobody is saying, "Hey, we desperately need God. Let's go get the ark."

For seven months, nothing. But there was a second thing they did. It was in verse 15. It says:

"And the Levites took down the ark of the LORD, and the coffer that was with it, wherein the jewels of gold were, and put them on the great stone: and the men of Bethshemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices the same day unto the LORD."⁴

Let me tell you the other problem, the other thing that occurs, how you get in a mess, not only just an indifference to the things of God, but an interest in others. And I put that in parenthesis. Let me tell you who the others has become in our culture, anybody and everybody but God himself. We have an absolute fascination with what other people are doing, saying, thinking or where they are. That is how this thing known as social media, Facebook and Twitter. Listen. I really don't care what you ate for breakfast. I don't care. But that is what is out there. In 160 characters or less you can find out how long it took them to get school, what they... I mean it is just unbelievable.

Listen. You want proof that this is happening? You look in the world today. Look at the economy, where the economy is. You look at the political ... you look at what is happening in the Middle East and turn on the morning news tomorrow and I promise you within the first few stories there will be something about the life of a celebrity. That is not news. But we are interested in others.

And here is what happened in 1 Samuel six. The Philistines come back with the ark. It is not raveling the way it needs to. And they look and they go, "Oh, what did you bring?" They were more interested in what the Philistines brought than the fact that God had been

⁴1 Samuel 6:15.

absent for seven months. They were more interested in what did you do with this than what they should have done with it.

How did we get in the mess we are today? An indifference to the things of God and an unbelievable interest in others rather than an interest in God.

But it is the last thing that is the most mysterious in this passage. It is in verse 19 when the men are killed because they look into the ark. As I mentioned earlier it says 50,070 men were killed. And there is great debate. If you have a study Bible or a Bible commentary, that we are talking about did we get this number? I mentioned one of multiple theories. One of the theories is they asked everybody in the region to come out and see the ark. It was finally back. And it was just such a huge crowd that 50,000 died. Some people will say, "Well, there is already 34,000 Israelites dead from chapter four, 16,000 died here so for a total of 50,000." And there is all kinds of different debates.

Can we just say that people are dead that shouldn't be? Can we just say that there are consequences that occurred that did not have to happen. Why? Because they opened the lid. Now, first and foremost, God had made very clear instructions. Do not touch the ark. Later on 1 Chronicles chapter 13 verses nine and 10 there is a well meaning man by the name of Uzzah who sees the ark traveling and it is tilting. He is afraid that it is going to tip over and he touches it and he dies immediately. Why? Because God really doesn't need your help. But Uzzah thought he did. He is struck dead immediately.

So here they are told not to touch it. They don't just touch it. They open it. They literally open the lid and there is all kinds of speculation, all kinds of questions. Why would they do such a thing? Were they curious if the Philistines had taken the jar of manna? Were they curious was the rod of Aaron still there? Were the 10 Commandments still in one piece? We don't know if it was curiosity. We don't know if it was concern. We don't know if it was sheer rebellion. What we know is that they did what they were told not to do.

And this is the final thing that gets us in the mess, yes an indifference to God, yes, an interest in others, but an inconsistent lifestyle. When the ark of the covenant came in verse 13 it was traveling on an item and in a way that it should to have been traveling. And they took every precaution to sacrifice it. How dare we let the ark travel that way, but then four verses later we are going to open up the lid.

Let me tell you how we get in the mess we have gotten in our world today is when we live an inconsistent life, when we say, "I will tell that story at work, but I am not going to tell it at church. I will tell that story to that person, but not to that this person." The Bible's formal word for this is called hypocrisy. It means that we set aside one time to live differently than another and one of the reasons we have gotten in the mess that we have gotten in the world today, is that because we have been a, as a whole, a church that lives for Jesus on Sunday and then waits six more days till we live for him again. And we wonder how we got the mess we are in.

You know, I first witnessed this as a young college student. As a freshman in college I went to a school that is considered a Christian school. At the time it was considered a Baptist school. And the question wasn't, you know, if you went to church. The question that they ask is: Where do you go to church? Why? Because that was kind of... at the time that was just kind of the feeling of the campus. And I will never forget the first time I saw what I am about to share with you, is I had gone to church that Sunday morning. I had come back to my dormitory going to the cafeteria that was the cafeteria, generally speaking, for the freshman guys on campus. And I would witness 18 year old and 19 year old young men who had slept till 11:30 in the morning, gotten in the shower, put on clothes as if they had gone to church and walked down and ate and told nobody the difference.

It was mesmerizing to me that you could live that kind of life. It was mesmerizing. Hey, I will admit. I did to have perfect church attendance, but at least when I went down at noon I was in shorts and a t-shirt and a baseball cap, because there is one thing that turns of the world more than anything else about the gospel of Jesus Christ and that is when you live it on Sunday and you don't on Monday. And inconsistency has gotten us to where we are. We are no different than the Israelites. We are in the same position. We are experiencing the same thing, because we are guilty of the same thing.

But that is why chapter seven verse three is so important. He says:

“If ye do return unto the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods.”⁵

In conclusion I want to take you back to Joshua chapter 24, the beginning of what we know as the ark of the covenant, when the Israelites had constructed it in the wilderness and they are about to go into the Promised Land. In Joshua chapter 24 the leader of the people of God gives them this great speech. In fact, we put it on placards and we put it on stones and we hang it over our houses.

“...as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”⁶

That is only a part of the verse. He basically says that we are going to turn away from the gods of our forefathers. We are going to turn away from our idols. We are going to turn away from the wickedness of this world and as for me and my house we will serve the Lord. And he offers the challenge to the people of Israel. This is one of the most fascinating passages of Scripture in the Bible. And the people resounding, I mean, the ark of the covenant is there. They are about to go into the Promised Land. They are about to see the water part. And do you know what they say?

We will serve the Lord.

Do you know what Joshua says to them? This is good pastoral advice. He says, “You can't serve the Lord.”

⁵ 1 Samuel 7:3.

⁶ Joshua 24:15.

You look at that passage of Scripture and you go, “What nerve did he have?”

It wasn't nerve, it was accuracy. They never said, “We will turn away from our idols.” They said, “We just want to serve the Lord.”

That is the problem. When we say, “I want the Lord in my right hand and the world in my left, I want the Lord on the weekend and the world during the week. I want the Lord during this time of day, but not during that time of day.” And what he says is if you want the Philistines out, if you want the world changed starting right there, what does he say? Turn your hearts to the Lord and put away your idols.

That is the solution.

How did we get in our mess? The same way they did. How do we get out? The same way they did. You read the rest of 1 Samuel seven. Do you know what they do? They turn away from their idols. They turn away to the Lord and all of the sudden, all the ills are eradicated. God goes before them just like he did Jericho.

How many of you today in you own personal life, your family's life, your community's life, our culture's life? How many of you would say, “Jeff, I just wish all the stuff I see on the news would just go on. I just wish it was eradicated”?

It can be if we do what they did. The problem is we want to have one hand with the Lord and one hand with the world. It says that we must turn from our idols. We must seek the Lord with not some, but what does it say? All of our heart.

Let me tell you what this fancy word is. Are you ready? Big theological word. Repent. That is all it means.

Allow me to demonstrate before our time of invitation a visual demonstration of what repentance really means. It means to walk one direction, stop and turn around and walk the opposite.