

Grace in Transition | The Book of Samuel

The Ark of God (Humiliation of Dagon et al)

First Samuel 5

9.27.20

Now the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. ² Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it to the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon. ³ When the Ashdodites arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and set him in his place again. ⁴ But when they arose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. And the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off on the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. ⁵ Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor all who enter Dagon's house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

⁶ Now the hand of the LORD was heavy on the Ashdodites, and He ravaged them and smote them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territories. ⁷ When the men of Ashdod saw that it was so, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is severe on us and on Dagon our god." ⁸ So they sent and gathered all the lords of the Philistines to them and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?" And they said, "Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath." And they brought the ark of the God of Israel around. ⁹ After they had brought it around, the hand of the LORD was against the city with very great confusion; and He smote the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them. ¹⁰ So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. And as the ark of God came to Ekron the Ekronites cried out, saying, "They have brought the ark of the God of Israel around to us, to kill us and our people." ¹¹ They sent therefore and gathered 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, so that it will not kill us and our people." For there was a deadly confusion throughout the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. ¹² And the men who did not die were smitten with tumors and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

For the last few weeks we've been looking at The Book of Samuel. It all takes place around a thousand years before the birth of Jesus Christ... So, it's all pretty foreign to us (Iron Age). Except that the basic nature of human beings is still the same. And WE also know (like THEY did) what it's like to live in a time of transition and uncertainty.

The old regime in Israel has now died out... and we're waiting for Samuel, the prophet/priest, to be recognized as the new leader and the leadership vacuum is really evident. Israel seems adrift and life is inhumane...and brutish. Bob Dylan wrote, "There are many here among us who feel that life is but a joke."

Today, we want to think about taking life seriously. The Bible teaches that when the Church and then, in time, even the society around the Church, when the Church takes God seriously, things begin to change for good. Today we want to think about the weightiness of God, the idea of God's holiness and otherness and uniqueness and what happens when He is given weight and seen to be significant and all-important.

This is what our culture used to call reverence and what the Bible calls "the fear of the Lord". "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9.10) and when that sense of awe and the clean fear of God (Ps 19.9) is restored, the Church and even, eventually, the culture around the Church are on the brink of wisdom and renewal and new life.

What is reverence? What happens when it disappears? What are the counterfeits for reverence and how is true reverence or "the fear of the Lord", how is it restored and what are its effects in our lives, the church and in the larger society?

Let's look at: **1) Glory Story and Sequel**

2) How the Fear of God Kills All Other Fears

Israel is again at war with the Philistines (as we saw last week), war is a fact of life... and it's a fact of life for the Church, then and now.

And that's the problem... this is the Church, before Christ, God's uncommon (holy) people not taking God seriously. They're not taking God's Person seriously. They're not giving weight to their history as the people of Abraham and the people of the Exodus. They're far from seeing life as the gift that it is. The (uncommon) Israelites and their pagan neighbors (the Philistines) have a common vision of a world where human beings survive by controlling and manipulating the powers, the forces of nature and they're using spiritual maneuvering in order to tame the spiritual forces.

The Israelites tried to use the Ark of the Covenant as a force-field or a magic charm. But God would rather the symbol of His Presence, the sign and guarantee of His marriage to Israel – God would rather it go into exile than to allow His people to mistakenly think He can be controlled and manipulated.

So, the Philistines won the battle and took the Ark of the Covenant into their temple, the house of Dagon.

This was a common thing to do – the victorious army would take the idols of the defeated enemy and put those idols in their own pantheon of gods. So YHWH is kidnapped... but He's given a place of honor at the feet of the chief deity of the Philistines, Dagon. Some say Dagon was god of the storm or god of grain/fertility (we really don't know).

When the symbol of YHWH's presence is put before Dagon, it quickly becomes a tragic comedy... In this tragic time when life isn't taken seriously, God will use comedy to get their attention. It's a comedy about a god who's humiliated/exposed by the glory of the God of Abraham...and then a wrap-up that accentuates the point and leaves the church itself humbled and in a posture ripe for restoration.

On the second day, Dagon is fallen. They think it was an earthquake or something – so they pray to Dagon and he jumps up on his pedestal – NO! Idols have to be carried. Psalm 115: "They have mouths, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they cannot see ... ears, but they cannot hear ... noses, but they cannot smell...hands, but they cannot feel... Those who make them and everyone who trusts in them will become like them." (5-8)

On the third day (the day when death gives way to life!) early in the morning, Dagon is dead! His power and wisdom, his hands and head are severed and laying on the threshold (the Philistines would remember this every time they stepped over a threshold!) And then there's a plague (like in our own day!) maybe the bubonic plague carried by mice/rats. People break out with tumors!

So they surmise that MAYBE, Israel's God, YHWH, did this and... just in case He did, they get rid of the Ark... But the reader knows: there's no question, "the HAND of YHWH was heavy on the Ashdodites".

Dagon's hands are helpless (cut off) but YHWH's hand is K-B-D (remember from last week?): "kabod" means glory, weight, heavy, serious, important, significant. Dagon is a powerless lightweight (like chaff that blows away Ps 1) but YHWH is glorious – His arm is not short and His hand is heavy! Dagon has to be carried around but YHWH is not a statue – He is the invisible Presence who is enthroned above the Cherubim.

So they move the Ark to each of the five principle cities of the Philistines and the result is the same. There are rats and a plague with tumors – v.11 (repeats) "The HAND of God was very heavy there." It's like the days of Joshua when God's Presence conquered one city after the next... God's victory tour... and the Israelites do nothing!

So this is a glory story! The idol is insignificant, trivial, meaningless, powerless BUT the God of the Israelites is glorious – weighty, heavy, all-powerful, unique ONLY, one-of-a-kind.

And then the sequel (CH 6): they decide to send the Ark back to Israel (just in case it's the cause of this plague). The Philistine priests and prophets and leaders remember that this God of the Israelites was also heavy with the Egyptians and those stubborn Egyptians "HEAVIED" their hearts (K-B-D). They hardened or heeded or gave weight to their own whims rather than give serious consideration to the God of Israel.

So, they conclude (next CH, v 5): “we must give glory (K-B-D) to the God of Israel.” The pagans remember the history and the works of this God and how He loved and saved His people from Egypt. The Israelites forget their own history but the pagans remember!

So they send the Ark on a cart along with a guilt offering (a box of gold tumors and gold rats – no kidding). They make it a test (still not sure!) by using cows to pull a new cart, cows that have young calves. “If the cows walk AWAY from their calves (which cows NEVER do!) and they go to the Israelites – THEN, we’ll know that this plague was from the God of Israel.”

And the cows do the un-natural thing...the supernatural thing: they walk away from their own calves, the mothers complaining all the way (v.12 – “lowing”) It was as if someone was driving them... And indeed, Someone WAS driving them.

The Israelites are glad to see the Ark. They put the Ark in a field owned by a man named Joshua the Beth-shemite. They break up the cart and offer the cows as a sacrifice (it’s a Levitical City with plenty of priests there). Then some of the Israelites decide to either stare at the Ark (which was always covered behind curtains – so it’s like spiritually immodest of them) OR it could be translated that they tried to look IN the Ark (“maybe there’s more gold in there) and God struck down 70 Israelites for their impertinence/irreverence.

And the whole episode ends with the Israelites crying, “Who is able to stand before YHWH, this holy God?” And they brought the Ark to the home of a man named Abinidab where it stayed for 20 years.

Now here’s what we learn about reverence from these strange episodes. It’s not really something we can work up in ourselves OR legislate/impose on others. When people try to force reverence on others, it always ends in some type of formalism or legalism.

The Pharisees in the time of Jesus looked reverent but the way they treated the Messiah exposed their “reverence” as religious showmanship. It was only externalism and as long as a person dressed the right way, washed the right way, behaved (in public) the right way, that person was considered... reverent.

But they were actually the most deeply IRreverent people who ever lived. They spit in the face of God – while wearing the right clothes (Mark 14.65 et al). Real reverence is NOT simply a matter of looking the part or dressing or talking or acting the part – it emanates from a heart that’s filled with HOLY JOY.

It begins with that final statement (end of CH 6), “Who can stand before YHWH, this holy God?” You see yourself NOT in relation to other people... who are... you know: “A LOT WORSE THAN I AM!.. With their loud music and filthy mouths and skinny jeans or baggy jeans... dressing like a

floosy or calling the waitress, 'sweetheart'" – It's always MY tendency to judge others for sins that aren't a temptation for ME.

But when you see yourself NOT in comparison to others... but only as a sinner standing before "YHWH, THIS HOLY GOD"... When you recognize that He is the weighty Judge of every human being who ever lived. Every person will be up for review; all your secrets will be known; you will be judged NOT in comparison to "bad people" but in relation to THIS HOLY GOD who commanded that you love Him every second of your life with ALL YOUR HEART SOUL MIND AND STRENGTH... the God who commanded that you always love other people as much as you love yourself...

When you see that – when you get a glimpse of God's other-ness...God's holiness. It's utterly terrifying. You'll say with Isaiah, "It's all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the LORD of Heaven's Armies." (Isa 6.5 NLT)

It's the feeling Peter had when Jesus Christ called him and Peter compared himself NO LONGER with the prostitutes and cheaters and all those bad people... but this time with a totally, impeccably pure Man. And Peter was terrified and TAPPED OUT, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5.8 NIV)

And yet in both these situations and there are multiplied examples throughout the Bible and in later history, when the holy God gives you that glimpse... the MOST terrifying part about it and simultaneously joyful, is that Peter and Isaiah and even these spiritually DULL Israelites, God wants them! He says to Peter, "Do not fear, from now on you'll be fishing for people!" AND to Isaiah, "Who will I send for me?... i.e. I have a mission for YOU!"

The Philistines saw the great touchstone, the hallmark event of the OT – the Exodus. That was the moment when the Holy Love of God was most clearly shown to His people... The Philistines said, "Hey, we've heard of this God and how He loved and saved His people..." But the Israelites seem to forget. Not seeing God's fearsome mercy, everything was trivial.

And as the Hebrew Church was to look back to the Exodus, the International Church looks to the New Exodus in Jesus Christ. He came as the Ideal Man and the Incarnation of God... He came, as we saw last week, "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1.15), the invisible Presence between the outstretched wings of the angels on the Ark had NOW become visible in Jesus Christ... and He voluntarily humbled Himself for ME.

"No one takes My life from Me", said Jesus Christ, "but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again." (John 10.18)

Dagon has fallen and he can't get up... Jesus Christ has laid down His life and He can take it up again. He enters a state of humiliation VOLUNTARILY because in the deeper magic of God's Kingdom – only by His living a perfectly HOLY life...and only by His being humiliated IN MY PLACE... taking the judgment I rightly deserve – that's the only way I could stand in the Presence of this Holy God.

His hands had to be rendered powerless (pinned to a Cross) and His sacred Head but be crowned with shame and pierced with thorns. And all the gods and powers will bow to Him...or be broken beyond repair.

And when I see and feel MY SINFULNESS in comparison with this Holy God and then I trust His being voluntarily humiliated FOR me...that engenders true reverence in me. Holy Joy is the result.

It's NOT censorious or merely external. It's not a sour looking down the nose at "even this tax-collector" but it's a weighty humbleness.

It makes me see my sin (not explain it away or blame others or minimize the damage) it grieves me but it also sees the God in humiliation whose Almighty Hands (heavy hands and tender) were rendered powerless for me and whose Sacred Head was wrapped in pain and guilt for me. Because He emptied Himself and entered into this state of humiliation, I will be honored and accepted. My life will be weighty. Holy joy and serious gladness is mine.

This is the threshold into the Church – you have to trip over the Almighty Hands and the Sacred Head that were laid down for you...

And when you get that, it makes you tremble... BUT the fear of the Lord and serious joy begin to liberate you from other fears. You can work through them as you see your worst fear – the judgment of your life and the just rejection you deserve – that fear is put to rest and after that all the other fears...get small.