

God Makes His Presence and Power Known

1 Samuel 5

1 Samuel 5 - *"Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. ² When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon. ³ And when the people of Ashdod arose early in the morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the earth before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and set it in its place again. ⁴ And when they arose early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. The head of Dagon and both the palms of its hands were broken off on the threshold; only Dagon's torso was left of it. ⁵ Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor any who come into Dagon's house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.*

⁶ But the hand of the LORD was heavy on the people of Ashdod, and He ravaged them and struck them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory. ⁷ And when the men of Ashdod saw how it was, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is harsh toward us and Dagon our god." ⁸ Therefore they sent and gathered to themselves all the lords of the Philistines, and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?" And they answered, "Let the ark of the God of Israel be carried away to Gath." So they carried the ark of the God of Israel away. ⁹ So it was, after they had carried it away, that the hand of the LORD was against the city with a very great destruction; and He struck the men of the city, both small and great, and tumors broke out on them.

¹⁰ Therefore they sent the ark of God to Ekron. So it was, as the ark of God came to Ekron, that the Ekronites cried out, saying, "They have brought the ark of the God of Israel to us, to kill us and our people!" ¹¹ So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines, and said, "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it go back to its own place, so that it does not kill us and our people." For there was a deadly destruction throughout all the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. ¹² And the men who did not die were stricken with the tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven."

Background Notes

In 1 Samuel 4, Israel was defeated at the battle of Ebenezer. In that battle Hophni and Phinehas, the sons the high priest, were killed. Eli himself died when he heard that the Philistines had taken the Ark of God (1 Samuel 4:10-18). Eli's daughter-in-law also died at this time as she was giving birth to a son. She named him Ichabod, meaning "no glory," because the glory had departed from Israel when the Ark of God was captured. 1 Samuel 4:19-22, *"Now his daughter-in-law, Phinehas' wife, was with child, due to be delivered; and when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and gave birth... Then she named the child Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel!" because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. ²² And she said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."*

1 Samuel 5:1 tells us that the Philistines took the Ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod, one of the five cities of the Philistines. The other major Philistine cities were Ashkelon, Ekron, Gaza, and Gath, the hometown of Goliath. The Philistines put the Ark into the temple of their god Dagon (v2). Dagon was the fish god or fertility god of the Philistines. The image of Dagon was half man and half fish; the upper part was the image of a man, and the lower part was the tail of a fish. (On one of our Holy Land tours we stayed in the Hotel Dagon in Ashkelon. Fortunately, there were no images of Dagon in the lobby, or I'm sure we would have left -- or at least pushed the image over!)

During the night the image of Dagon fell over before the Ark of God! So, the Philistines propped Dagon up again, thinking it had fallen by accident, probably blaming one of their own priests for not being more careful when handling the image of their god. But the next night Dagon fell over before the ark of the Lord once again, and this time its head and hands were broken off, with only the torso of a fish left! *"And when they arose early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. The head of Dagon and both the palms of its hands were broken off on the threshold; only Dagon's torso was left of it"* (v4). You've got to believe that God has a sense of humor!

Rather than get the message that their god was powerless before the One True God of Israel, the Philistines continued to reverence Dagon, even preventing anyone from walking on the threshold of the temple where their idol had fallen. How blind is the condition of people who don't know God!

Doctrinal Points

1. God will not be reduced to a "small g" god.

Why did the Philistines put the Ark of the Covenant into their temple along with their god Dagon? Answer: Because the Philistines were polytheists. The Philistines didn't deny that there was a "god" or "gods" of the Hebrews, and that the Hebrew "god" or "gods" were very powerful. Notice what the Philistines said about the "mighty gods" of Israel, when the Israelites brought the Ark of the Covenant into their camp: *"Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness"* (1 Samuel 4:8).

As far as the Philistines were concerned, placing the Ark of God beside their god Dagon in a pagan temple was giving the "god" of the Hebrews a place of honor among the other gods. What they were actually doing was reducing the mighty God of Israel to the level of Dagon, the Philistine fish god! They were believed that the One True God of Israel was just one of many "small g" gods! But the God of the Universe will not be reduced to a "small g" god.

Just as the Philistines reduced the God of Israel to the level of their god, Dagon, so modern pagans try to reduce God in much the same way, in just about every elementary school, high school and university in this country. In these schools, students are taught that the Bible is not God's unique Word -- it is only one religious book among many religious books. They are taught that Christianity is just another religion -- it is only one way among many ways to God. These folks think

that they're doing the Bible and Christianity a big favor by including them in "a place of honor" beside other books and other religions -- but in essence, they are reducing the One True God to the level of a "small g" god.

But the God of the Universe will not be reduced to a "small g" god, and there's only one book inspired by the One True God. The Bible, the Word of God, is unique, and there is only one way to the one true God, through Jesus Christ, God's only Son. In John 14:6 Jesus said, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."*
God will not be reduced to a "small g" god.

2. God will not be appeased like a "small g" god.

Verse 6 says, *"the hand of the Lord was heavy on the people of Ashdod."* The Lord ravaged them! He struck the people of Ashdod with tumors, or boils. So, what did the people of Ashdod do when they realized that the Ark of God was causing their tumors or boils? After a discussion, they decided to send it on to Gath -- so that they could get the tumors as well! From Gath it was sent on, like a hot potato, to Ekron!

From the Philistine point of view, they were not trying to pass on the tumors to their fellow Philistines. No, they perceived that the "god" of the Hebrews was angry about the location where they had placed the Ark, so they were trying to appease this angry god by "moving it around" to find out where the "god" wanted to settle. After all, this is the way it worked in the realm of the pagan gods. As long as the gods were appeased, they were no longer angry. But the One True God will not be appeased -- He is **not** a "small g" god!

We know from Scripture, of course, that demonic forces are behind the idols of pagan gods, and demons do demand to be appeased. This is part of the bondage that is the life of pagan unbelievers. But God is not to be appeased like the pagan gods; He is not appeased at all. God is not appeased by money or by "good works." Salvation is not attained by appeasing God. God is a god of love, and He offers free salvation to anyone who will turn to Him in faith.

It's important to understand that the New Testament term "propitiation" is not the idea of appeasement. Many people get this confused. God is not "appeased." "Propitiation" is the wonderful truth that the righteous wrath of God against sin has been satisfied by the death of Christ on the cross. Jesus Christ died for our sin. God will not be appeased like a "small g" god.

Practical Application

Don't prop up your idols!

What did the Philistines do when their idol fell over before the Ark of the Covenant? They propped it up again! Rather than acknowledge that the God of Israel was taking down their idol of stone, they propped it up again. And if God hadn't taken the head and hands off of Dagon, the Philistines would have continued to prop their idol up, time after time. Are we guilty of propping up our idols? 1 John 5:21, which is addressed to Christians, says *"Little children, keep*

yourselves from idols.” “Idols” are things that prevent us from making God #1 in our lives. Pleasure, business success, beauty, possessions, social success, power, money, athletic ability – the list of possible idols goes on and on, and all of them can keep us from making God #1 in our lives.

God has ways of having our idols fall over before Him. He can have our idols fail us or disappoint us so that we’ll get the message that our priorities are wrong. Too often we don’t get the message, and we prop up our idols again and again rather than honor and worship the Lord alone. God wants us to recognize and deal with our idols ourselves. He would rather not have to step in and forcibly remove them from our priority list. But sometimes God has to knock down or even destroy our idols so that we can’t continue to prop them up.

Do you have any idols in your life that are always falling over – idols that always seem to fail you or disappoint you or let you down? Don’t prop them up – get rid of them, and make God #1 in your life! Don’t prop up your idols!