

The Ark of the Lord Returns to Israel

1 Samuel 6

1 Samuel 6 - *"Now the ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months. ² And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners, saying, "What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us how we should send it to its place."³ So they said, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty; but by all means return it to Him with a trespass offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why His hand is not removed from you."*

⁴ Then they said, *"What is the trespass offering which we shall return to Him?"*

They answered, "Five golden tumors and five golden rats, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines. For the same plague was on all of you and on your lords. ⁵ Therefore you shall make images of your tumors and images of your rats that ravage the land, and you shall give glory to the God of Israel; perhaps He will lighten His hand from you, from your gods, and from your land. ⁶ Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? When He did mighty things among them, did they not let the people go, that they might depart? ⁷ Now therefore, make a new cart, take two milk cows which have never been yoked, and hitch the cows to the cart; and take their calves home, away from them. ⁸ Then take the ark of the LORD and set it on the cart; and put the articles of gold which you are returning to Him as a trespass offering in a chest by its side. Then send it away, and let it go. ⁹ And watch: if it goes up the road to its own territory, to Beth Shemesh, then He has done us this great evil. But if not, then we shall know that it is not His hand that struck us—it happened to us by chance."

¹⁰ Then the men did so; they took two milk cows and hitched them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home. ¹¹ And they set the ark of the LORD on the cart, and the chest with the gold rats and the images of their tumors. ¹² Then the cows headed straight for the road to Beth Shemesh, and went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right hand or the left. And the lords of the Philistines went after them to the border of Beth Shemesh. ¹³ Now the people of Beth Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley; and they lifted their eyes and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it. ¹⁴ Then the cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and stood there; a large stone was there. So they split the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. ¹⁵ The Levites took down the ark of the LORD and the chest that was with it, in which were the articles of gold, and put them on the large stone. Then the men of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices the same day to the LORD. ¹⁶ So when the five lords of the Philistines had seen it, they returned to Ekron the same day.

¹⁷ These are the golden tumors which the Philistines returned as a trespass offering to the LORD: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron; ¹⁸ and the golden rats, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and country villages, even as far as the large stone of Abel on which they set the ark of the LORD, which stone remains to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh.

¹⁹ Then He struck the men of Beth Shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. He struck fifty thousand and seventy men of the people, and the people lamented because the LORD had struck the people with a great slaughter.

²⁰ And the men of Beth Shemesh said, "Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? And to whom shall it go up from us?" ²¹ So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjath Jearim, saying, "The Philistines have brought back the ark of the LORD; come down and take it up with you."

Background Notes

In 1 Samuel 4, the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines, taken to Ashdod, and put in the temple of their pagan god, Dagon. God let His supremacy over Dagon be known, in no uncertain terms, by having the Dagon idol fall over before the Ark of the Covenant! When nothing but the torso of Dagon remained, and when the Philistines were smitten with tumors in every city where the Ark went, they finally realized that they had better send the Ark back to Israel! Why did the Philistines send the Ark back with an offering of molded golden tumors and molded golden rats or mice? What was all that about, anyway? These golden images were a votive offering. Like other polytheistic pagans, the Philistines believed that you could appease angry gods by presenting them with an offering that represented your problem, and how you were experiencing the judgment of the gods. I have seen votive offerings that were unearthed in the archeological excavations of ancient Corinth. On display in the museum are images of all parts of the human body, molded in ceramic and metal. These votive offerings were presented to the Greek and Roman gods, in the hope of gaining healing from the diseases that affected these parts of the body. The fact that the Philistines' offering consisted of five golden rats and five golden tumors may indicate that they believed the God of Israel was striking their five cities with a plague that was spread by rats -- and indeed, that may be exactly what God was allowing to happen.

The Philistines decided to send the Ark of the Covenant back to Israel in a way that would prove that the God of Israel was indeed a powerful God and all this was not by chance. They yoked together two milk cows that were still nursing their calves, hitched them up to a cart, and released them. Sure enough, against all laws of nature, and against motherly instinct, the cows headed straight for Israel and arrived at the border town of Beth Shemesh. Standing today at the location of ancient Beth Shemesh, and looking down the fields of grain toward the land of the ancient Philistines for quite a distance, we can visualize the Ark returning to Israel!

Doctrinal Points

1. God shows mercy when people are ignorant of His laws.

Even though God sent a plague on the Philistines until they sent the Ark of the Lord back to Israel, we see the mercy of God extended to the Philistines. How? How many Philistines touched the Ark and looked into the Ark? Certainly a number of Philistines touched the Ark when they carried it around to their various cities and when they prepared the Ark for its return to Israel, and yet we don't read that any of them were struck dead, as were the people of Beth Shemesh who looked into the Ark. Why? Because God shows mercy when people are ignorant of His laws.

In His Law, God gave specific instructions about the way the sacred Ark of the Covenant was to be handled and carried. Only the priests and Levites were to be involved in moving the holy objects of the Tabernacle, and even they were not to touch the Ark, but carry it on special poles. Anyone else who touched the Ark did so at the cost of his or her own life.

But God gave these laws to Israel, not the Philistines. Now this doesn't mean that God lowers His standards, depending on whom He's dealing with. No -- but God does take into account when people don't know the truth, through no fault of their own. In 1 Timothy 1:13, even the apostle Paul said, "...I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief." Paul actually thought that he was doing God's will when he was persecuting followers of Jesus, but he obtained mercy because he was ignorant of the truth. This doesn't mean that ignorance allows you into heaven. Certainly not! Romans 1 clearly says that no one is ignorant of the existence and nature of God. But God does show mercy when people are ignorant of His laws.

2. God holds people accountable when they are not ignorant of His laws.

"Then He struck the men of Beth Shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. He struck fifty thousand and seventy of the people with a great slaughter." That's a lot of men for such a small border town, but maybe the people came from miles around when they heard that the Ark of the Covenant had returned. On the other hand, some translations give 70 as the number of men who died, because some Hebrew manuscripts have 70 as the number, not 50,070. What's the answer, anyway? Was it 50,070 or only 70 men? We simply can't be sure.

In any case, the men who died were not ignorant of God's Laws, so they were held accountable to God's Laws. According to Joshua 21:16, Beth Shemesh was one of the 48 Levitical cities, and the Levites there took the Ark off the Philistine cart (v15). The Levites knew God's Laws and were responsible to communicate God's Laws to non-Levites. So, the men of Beth Shemesh were not ignorant of God's Law. Certainly they would not have been ignorant of the law that commanded people not to touch the Ark or look into the Ark. Under the Law, even the Levites were not to see the Ark; they were only to carry it when it was covered. The Levites knew this, and most likely every Israelite knew it as well.

What happened at Beth Shemesh was not the result of ignorance, and when people are not ignorant of His Laws, God holds them accountable. 1 Peter 4:17 says, *"For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?"* The point of this verse is that if God judges and holds believers accountable, how much greater will be the judgment of those who reject the gospel of God?

When we come into God's family, we are expected to learn and obey His Word. When we come to know His Word, and are no longer ignorant of His Word, then we are held accountable when we disobey His Word. God must discipline His disobedient children. God may discipline believers with sickness and even death for their own good (1 Corinthians 11 and 1 John 5). Surely it would be better to go home to heaven early, than to continue to sin and do further damage to yourself, your family, and your fellowship. Judgment begins at the household of God. God holds people accountable when they're not ignorant of His laws.

Practical Application

Let's trust God to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or think.

The words of this practical application come straight from Ephesians 3. *"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever."* Where do we see this truth taught in 1 Samuel 6? When the Philistines captured the Ark of God, do you think that anyone in Israel was praying for its return? Samuel certainly was, and probably a number of other godly Israelites prayed as well. Do you think that any of these godly Israelites, thought, in their wildest imaginations, that God would answer their prayers in the way that He did? No battles! No covert operations or secret missions! No payoffs or bribes! No spies or traps! Just answered prayer!

Can you imagine Samuel's amazement when he heard that the Ark of the Covenant had returned to Israel on a Philistine cart, pulled by a couple of cows? What an answer to prayer! Now God doesn't always answer our prayers in such dramatic ways -- but He can, and sometimes He does. Let's trust God to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or think!