

Is God Safe?

I Samuel 5:1-12

By Dr. Derek Thomas

Turn with me to I Samuel, chapter five. Before we read this passage together, let's go to God in prayer.

O Lord our God, we bow again in the majesty of Your presence. We come before You thankful that You have given to us a Bible. You've given to us a word that is able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ our Lord. Tonight as we turn to this passage that speaks of things strange and wonderful, we pray again for the blessing of the Holy Spirit, that we might read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. Hear us, Lord, we pray. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is God's holy, inerrant word:

When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

The hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and He terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory. And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god." So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?" They answered, "Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath." So they brought the ark of the God of Israel there. But after they had brought it around, the hand of the Lord was against the city, causing a very great panic, and He afflicted the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them. So they sent the ark of

God to Ekron. But as soon as the ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, "They have brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people." They sent therefore and gathered together 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, that it may not kill us and our people." For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there. The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

Amen. May God bless to us that reading of His holy, inerrant word.

You'll remember last week — those of you who were able to be here — you'll recall that there was a battle between the Philistines and the Israelites, first of all in a place called Aphek. (All of these cities are in Philistia, which is roughly equivalent to the modern Gaza to the west and on the coastline from about Jerusalem downwards on the coastline.) Well, you remember there was a battle in Aphek and 4,000 Israelite soldiers were killed. And then you remember someone had the bright idea to bring the ark of God into battle with them, and in a place called Ebenezer 30,000 Israelite men were slain. Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were killed according to the word of prophecy. Eli, on hearing the news, fell backward, broke his neck and died. Phinehas' wife, who was pregnant, on hearing the news of the death of her husband and her father-in-law, began labor pains, and before she died gave birth to a son whom she called Ichabod, meaning *the glory has departed*. Now the ark (as we read in the first verse of chapter 5) is taken from Ebenezer, the place of battle, to one of the Philistine cities called Ashdod.

Now there's something of an indelicacy that I must inform you of here in verse 6. The translation of the word that the ESV renders *tumors*...it is, according to Hebraists and certain scholars both ancient and modern, a word in Hebrew that can also mean — and I apologize — *hemorrhoids*. Indeed, Jerome's *Latin Vulgate* deliciously renders verse 6, "He smote them in the more secret parts of their posteriors." [*Laughter*.] Well, as indelicate as that is, I would just love that to be in my ESV Bible! We'll go with *tumors* for tonight.

The ark of God, then, is taken to Ashdod and placed in the temple of one of the Philistine deities, Dagon. Dagon...*dag* is a word for *corn*, so he may be the god of crops. Others think that he may have been the god of storm. But whatever, he is one of the pantheon of Philistine deities, and of course you can imagine and picture the symbolism that's now employed as the trophy of their battle, the ark of the covenant of Israel, representing as it did the God of Israel, is brought into Dagon's temple and set before him. Except that in the morning when someone inspects the temple of Dagon in Ashdod, poor old Dagon has fallen to the ground. And in verse 3 we read, "They took Dagon and put him back in his place." Now you have to imagine the author of Samuel — whether it's Samuel himself at this point — but you have to imagine that he must have been grinning

from ear to ear as he wrote that line, that this god of the Philistines needed the help of human hands and feet to put him back on his pedestal again. Except that the next day, it's worse. And Dagon hasn't just fallen to the ground, decrepit as he now must be, but his head has broken off, and his hands have broken off, and all that is left is his trunk. You can imagine the headline in *The Ashdod Times*: "Dagon Topped and Tailed in the Temple Before the Jewish Ark." It is a humiliation, and verse 5 records for us the lasting humiliation. Years, decades, perhaps even centuries later, there is still a degree of shock and horror about what happened in the temple of Dagon. And it happened, you see — as you sports fans will all too well understand — on home turf. It happened on home ground. It is, of course, a Humpty Dumpty story in days before Superglue®. They couldn't even put him back together again. Dagon was forever broken.

Now if you think that that opened the eyes of the Philistines to the ridiculousness of their worship of Dagon, you are sadly mistaken. Because however the implausibility and foolishness of the gods of this world may be, men and women still worship them, still give them credence, still pick them up and put them back in their place again.

So they decide to move the ark of the covenant. They decide to move the ark from Ashdod to Gath, about twelve miles to the east. And since the same thing happened in Gath, they decide to move it yet again, to Ekron, which is about five miles to the north. Only as you can readily understand, the folks in Ekron hear about the coming of this ark — perhaps see it even coming — and they gather together the bigwigs of the city of Ekron and say in no uncertain terms, 'That ark is not coming in here.' The hand of God was heavy upon them (verse 11). God has struck them down with...well, let's say "tumors"...something which rendered them incapacitated and in some instances killed them. God comes in judgment. God comes and displays the sovereignty of His nature and power, and all without Israelite help. He does this all by himself.

Now what in the world is this saying to us tonight? This strange, odd story from a time long, long ago in a place far, far away? What in the world has it got to say to us tonight? I want to put it to you that it has everything to say to us.

It has something to say to us about who God is. It has something to say to us about the power of God. It has something to say to us about the truthfulness of God — the God who is; the God who is there (and He is not silent); the only God there is. I want to put it to you that in essence this is the story of the whole Bible. This is what the Bible is about. It's about this story. From the Garden of Eden onwards it's about this story. It's about the warfare, it's about the hostility, it's about the forces of darkness against the forces of light. It's about God and the idols of this world. That's what happened in the Garden of Eden, isn't it, when Adam and Eve thought they knew better than God, and they bowed down and worshiped Satan? They worshiped his suggestion. They believed a lie, and in doing so dethroned the true God and set up for themselves a false god, an idol.

From the Garden of Eden onwards, it's always been the story of how man thinks of himself as wiser than God. This is a story of Philistine arrogance as well as of Israelite stupidity. It's just one more sordid tale of human autonomy.

The Philistines thought that they had controlled God. They had beaten Him in battle and He was now theirs to do their bidding...the one true God, Jehovah, Yahweh, the covenant Lord of the Old Testament, the only God there is — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit! That's what Calvin says, isn't it, in Book I and Chapter 11 of *The Institutes*, that “man's mind is a perpetual factory of idols.” Do you think because you have iPhones...do you think because you Twitter...do you think because you have satellite TV, that what went on in Dagon's temple no longer takes place in this age of communication and sophistication? I tell you tonight that the ark of the God of truth is still facing Dagon, facing him tonight, facing him on this Easter Day—the idols of men's hearts set in opposition to the one true God. My friend, the question that we have to ask ourselves tonight is the age-old question: Whom will you serve? It's the statement, isn't it, that would be made centuries later in the time of Ahab and Elijah: “Choose this day whom you will serve.” Are you going to serve Baal, or will you serve the one true God of Israel? It's Dagon and the God of Israel. It's the clash of the titans, and Dagon has fallen and his head is cut off. What a great story for Easter Day!

There's gospel here...there's gospel here. What are we celebrating this morning? You were here...most of you were here this morning when you heard the choir sing so fabulously Handel's *Messiah* in this anniversary year of George Frederick Handel. If that didn't move you to the very core of your being, you're made of stone. That God is triumphant, that God is victorious, that Christ is risen from the dead, that the grave could not hold Him, that death could not hold Him! That He lives by the power of an endless life! It's Dagon, the gods of this world, the philosophies of this world, the epistemologies of this world, the idols of men's hearts...or the God of Israel: the God who raised from the dead His own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and on that Easter morning the tomb was empty! And that cry of victory was heard: “He is not here! He is risen!”

I'm saying to you tonight that the whole message of the Bible is in this story, because the whole message of the Bible is about this story. It's who is triumphant, who rules, who reigns, who sits upon his throne, who holds the world in the palms of His hands? Who's in control of your life and mine? Who has the ultimate say? Who has the ultimate power? Who has the ultimate authority? Who is king? Who is Lord? You see, my friends, whatever occupies your heart other than Jesus is a god, and it's an idol. It's a Dagon. “I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold;” I'd rather have Jesus than anything that this world affords me. That's what he sang. Did you say “Amen” to that tonight? Did your hearts echo to the gospel notes of that song? That you'd rather have Jesus than anything that this world offers?

It's a tough world out there. There's a Richard Dawkins and the Sam Harris's and

others...they're not only opposed to religion, they're intolerant of it. They want it wiped off the face of the map. They don't want you to teach your children Bible stories or pray with them, or teach them the doctrines of the word of God because you're "indoctrinating" them in religion.

My dear friends, what a great story for Easter Day. What a delicious story that Dagon is toppled. His head is cut off. His hands (symbol, no doubt, of his power) are cut off and they're lying on the floor before the ark of the covenant, before the God of Israel. This is a story about triumph. It's a story about who rules. It's a story about the sovereignty of God. This is a story about the triumph of the God of truth over the powers of darkness.

You say to me tonight, "What's this strange story about?"

*And though this world with devils filled
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim —
we tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure,
for lo, his doom is sure.
One little word shall fell him.*

*That word, above all earthly powers,
no thanks to them, abideth.
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
through Him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go;
this mortal life also.
The body they may kill;
God's truth abideth still.
His kingdom is forever.*

His kingdom is forever...that's what this story is about, that the kingdom of God, the rule of God, the reign of God, the sovereignty of God is forever. No matter who the Dagon may be, no matter what the philosophies may be, no matter what the epistemologies may be, God has lost none of His ancient power. He is the same God yesterday, today, and forever.

Do you remember what Paul said when he wrote to the Thessalonian Christians? Those Thessalonians had been idol worshipers. They had worshiped idols of man's concoction, wonderful and weird and fanciful that they were. And when Paul sat down to write that letter to the Thessalonian church — one of the earliest of all the letters that he wrote — his heart filled with a sense of joy and of

gladness and of faith in God, because he says about them that they had been delivered from idols to serve the living and true God. They had been delivered from the Dragons of the world to serve the living and true God.

Did you note in verse 3? When this god, this Dagon creature...this bit of stone, this carved stone that they bow down and worship...that when Dagon fell in the presence of the ark of the covenant, surely anyone with a modicum of a brain would be able to say (even in this period of history would be able to say), 'The ark of the covenant is a more powerful god than Dagon. Dagon has failed us!' But no. They put him back in his place again. They are angry at what the ark of the covenant has done because they've humiliated their faith in Dagon.

But they don't give up Dagon, do they? Decades, centuries later they're still worshiping Dagon in the temple of Dagon. And no matter how much you point out the incoherence, the madness of the idolatry of this world, men and women dead in trespasses and in sin still bow down and worship their false gods. It's like when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. He's been dead for three days, and the King James says in that beautiful way, "Behold, he stinketh." He's dead. He's decomposing. And then Jesus says, "Lazarus, come forth!" And then there's this beautiful, extraordinary scene of Lazarus and his sisters and Jesus in the house in Bethany, and they're eating. They're having lunch! I'd give almost anything to know what they talked about at that lunch table. But you know, read the account in the Gospel of John. What are the Pharisees doing? What are the Pharisees doing while they're eating lunch with Lazarus? They're plotting to kill him. Jesus has just raised him from the dead, but they are so immersed and bound in their idolatry that they're now plotting to kill Lazarus.

My friends, these gods, these idols of yours...if you're not a Christian tonight, if you're not a believer tonight, if you haven't bowed the knee to Jesus Christ and confessed Him as Lord and Savior and Prophet and Priest and King...if you've never said, "I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold," but instead tonight you're chasing after gold...you're all bent out of shape because the price of gold is not what it should be...[actually, I think the reverse is probably now true.] But, my friends, I want to say to you tonight, whatever gods you bow down and give allegiance to — the gods of human reason, the gods of pleasure, the gods of sex, the gods of fame, the gods of Hollywood film stars — my friends, they are broken vessels, every single one of them. They can hold no water. They can hold no value. And today of all days we stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene, who walked out of a tomb in which they had laid Him as dead. He walked out victorious and alive, eating a piece of boiled fish within hours of having been raised from the dead.

My friends, this story tonight warns us. It warns us not to judge too quickly the seeming providences of defeat. I don't know what they were thinking in Israel. They were probably burying their dead, mourning their loss of 34,000 of their own. Grief stricken they must have been, and perhaps even the godliest among

them had lost all hope because the ark of the covenant had now been taken and was in the hands of Philistines. And God was at their mercy, and they were not there to help God along.

What would happen tonight if First Presbyterian Church was no more? What would happen tonight if the PCA was no more? What would happen tonight if RTS was no more? Is that the end of the gospel? Is that the end of Christianity? Is that the end of God's sovereignty in the world?

Of course not! Nor was it the end of the sovereignty of God when the ark of the covenant was in the hands of Philistines. There was no darker moment, my friend, than that moment when Jesus hung upon a cross, immolated and bruised and battered and bleeding...soldiers stuck a spear in His side to confirm that He was dead. His enemies have triumphed! The gods of this world have triumphed! Satan announced a party in the halls and corridors of hell, but he had not reckoned...he had not reckoned with the power of God. He had not reckoned with the power of Jesus Christ, because in the coolness of that tomb He came to life again.

That's the battle, isn't it? It's not the battle that you think it is sometimes. It's the battle between supernaturalism and naturalism. That's the battle that we are facing.

And on Easter Day we say with all of our hearts, "He is risen." And God is on His throne, and Jesus lives with the power of an endless life. He holds us — those of us who know Him and love Him — He holds us in the very palms of His hands, and He will not let us go. What a glorious truth! And it's right here in this story, that God never abdicates His sovereignty.
Let's pray together.

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